

Meeting Highlights
U.S. Coral Reef Task Force Meeting
May 4, 2006
Washington, D.C.

Full meeting summary and meeting materials (agendas, presentations, etc) are available on the Task Force web site (www.coralreef.gov). For more information contact Beth Dieveney (beth.dieveney@noaa.gov; 301-713-2989 x 200) or Roger Griffis (roger.b.griffis@noaa.gov; 301-713-2989 x 115).

General Summary

The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force held a public meeting in Washington D.C. May 4, 2006. The purpose of the meeting was to report progress on key Task Force action items and to learn about and take action on key issues related to coral reef conservation. The Meeting provided an opportunity for Task Force Members to share recent accomplishments, existing challenges, and possible partnership activities to better address coral reef research and conservation issues globally.

- The Task Force heard from leading experts on the causes and impacts of coral bleaching, disease, and additional tools utilized to better understand and conserve coral reef ecosystems.
- Two important **announcements** were made: the listing of two *Acropora* species as threatened under the Endangered Species Act and the Coral Reef Conservation Act Reauthorization introduced in the House of Representatives.
- The Task Force discussed and acted on two key **decision items** listed below (Full text of Decision Items can be found at www.coralreef.gov).
- During the Meeting, the Task Force also gave a number of **awards** to several local, regional, and national organizations and individuals in recognition of their significant contributions to coral reef science and management.
- **Public comment** was heard from ten individuals and organizations.
- Two seminars, hosted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, were held in conjunction with the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force meeting on May 5, 2006. These seminars highlighted two tools - **Biocriteria** and **Human Dimensions** that can be used in designing and implementing coral reef conservation and management actions.

Coral Species Listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act

NOAA Fisheries Service announced its decision to list elkhorn (*Acropora palmata*) and staghorn (*Acropora cervicornis*) corals as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This will be the first time a coral has been listed as endangered or threatened under the ESA. In response to a formal petition, a status review was initiated by NOAA Fisheries Service to determine whether these important, formerly widespread coral

species required ESA listing. The fisheries service convened the Atlantic Acropora Biological Review Team in June 2004. The results of the team's 10-month review led to the determination that a threatened listing was warranted for both elkhorn and staghorn corals because they are likely to become in danger of extinction throughout all of their ranges in the foreseeable future from a combination of factors. The primary factors include disease, temperature-induced bleaching, and physical damage from hurricanes. Other factors include damage from commercial and recreational activities, sediments and contaminants from land-based sources, and poor water quality.

To gather information from the public, constituents, and resource users, the fisheries service held seven conservation workshops throughout May 2006. The input from workshop participants will help identify programs and activities that may affect these species, physical and biological features essential for conservation, and possible areas to designate as critical habitat. Comments and suggestions can also be submitted to NOAA Fisheries Service's Southeast Regional Office via mail, fax, or email by Friday, June 22, 2006.

2005 Caribbean Coral Bleaching Interim Report

This session included presentations on the following:

- Initial survey results and spatial assessment – *Mark Eakin – NOAA*
- Case Study: Impact on USVI National Parks - Long term monitoring of bleaching rates, recovery and mortality – *Jeff Miller - NPS & Dr. Caroline Rogers - USGS*
- Management approach to coral reef ecosystem resiliency, Florida Reef Resiliency Program – *Phil Kramer - The Nature Conservancy*

The Task Force heard highlights of the Task Force led interagency response to the 2005 Caribbean coral bleaching event and an overview of a specific program in Florida, the Florida Reef Resilience Program, which is working to assess coral bleaching triggers and develop a plan for early warning and response.

Assessment of the 2005 Caribbean Coral Bleaching event involved over 20 nations and has resulted in the collection of over 1500 surveys of coral bleaching extent and impacts. Early results show that 90% of coral has bleached in some areas with some initial recovery but subsequent impact from coral disease, primarily white plague. Additional genetic research is underway to determine the range of coral susceptibility to bleaching and recovery or resilience. This research will inform management schemes that enhance protection of these corals and consider their resilience.

Following this interim report on the 2005 Caribbean Coral Bleaching event, *the Task Force charged the Steering Committee with compiling a final report that includes information on lessons learned for responding to future bleaching episodes and consideration of the socio-economic impacts of this bleaching event. This report will be presented at the next Task Force meeting.*

Keynote Presentation: Corals and Disease

Dr. Drew Harvell of Cornell University provided the Task Force with an overview of coral diseases, possible causes, symptoms, and solutions. To appropriately manage our coral reef ecosystems in the face of coral disease, a better understanding of the factors affecting coral reef immunity, response, and resistance to disease and various pathogens is essential. Of particular concern for coral reef susceptibility to disease are increased human populations, input from land-based-sources of pollution, and the long-term impacts from climate change. It is essential to project into the future how coral will be impacted by disease and develop plans to address and compensate for these projected impacts.

The Task Force charged the Steering Committee, with the Coral Disease and Health Consortium, to further examine coral diseases with specific focus on assessing the most pressing issues and recommendations on how to address them.

Task Force Addresses the use of Cyanide in Fishing and Trade Species

There is an urgent need for fast, reliable and convenient detection tests for determining whether cyanide and other poisons have been used in the collection of live coral reef fish entering into international trade. Many Task Force member agencies have expertise in toxicology, biomarkers and forensics that could be applied to this issue. The Task Force will form a working group on enforcement consisting of experts in law enforcement, field forensics, and toxicology/biomarkers to identify existing or potential cyanide detection methods or tests which could be used to determine if fish have been exposed to cyanide or other poisons. This Working Group will explore the usefulness and need to convene a broader expert panel to resolve the issues associated with cyanide and other poison detection tests.

All coral reef jurisdictions will identify and promote alternative, sustainable, non-destructive practices in regard to aquarium fisheries.

Task Force Endorses a 2008 International Year of the Reef Campaign

The Task Force received and endorsed a proposal for a 2008 International Year of the Reef and will work with the International Coral Reef Initiative and other partners to plan, support, and implement IYOR 2008.

Task Force Praises Local Action Strategy Implementation, Calls for a Status Report

The Local Action Strategies (LAS) identify and implement locally-relevant priority actions needed to reduce key threats to valuable coral reef ecosystems in each region. The LAS are three –year locally driven work-plans that require collaborative and cooperative action among federal, state, territory, and non-governmental partners. The Task Force is mid-way through the first three – year work plan cycle. The current status of implementation follows:

- Total LAS projects: 736 (102 American Samoa, 43 Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, 98 Guam, 223 Hawaii, 140 Florida, 45 U.S. Virgin Islands, 109 Puerto Rico)
- Projects funded, either totally or partially: 468, which amounts to \$24.8 million.
- Projects with no funding identified: 241, for a total of \$36.7 million 20M of which for capital Funding need for capital improvement projects: \$20 million
- Need increased federal support for funding and local federal agency participation
- Need for increased outreach and public awareness and assessment of its effectiveness

The Task Force called for a final Local Action Status Report to include performance indicators and a recommendation for development and implementation of the next cycle of LAS.

Northwest Hawaiian Islands Ecosystem Reserve

NOAA, DOI, and the State of Hawaii have signed a Memorandum of Understanding for cooperative management of the reserve. In late 2005, the state waters of the Northwest Hawaiian Islands were designated as a no take marine protected area.

NOAA is in the final stages of preparing the draft management plan, draft environmental impact statement and proposed regulations for the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Marine Sanctuary. These documents will be released for public comment. Once released, NOAA will be holding constituent briefings in Hawaii and in Washington D.C.

Coral Reef Conservation Act Reauthorization

Staff from the House of Representatives Resources Committee announced the intention to introduce a bill to reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000 (CRCA). The Senate passed a bill (S1390) to reauthorize the CRCA earlier in the year.

U.S. Coral Reef Task Force

A Presidential Executive Order established the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force in 1998 to lead U.S. efforts to preserve and protect coral reef ecosystems. Through the coordinated efforts of its members, including representatives of 12 federal agencies, the governors of seven states and territories, and the leaders of the Freely Associated States, the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force has helped lead U.S. efforts to protect and manage valuable coral reef ecosystems in the U.S. and internationally. NOAA and the Department of the Interior co-chair the Task Force.