

Clinton Administration Seeks No-Take Status for 20% of US Coral Reefs

The Clinton administration has proposed that the US provide "no-take" status to at least 20% of its coral reefs by 2010 in the interest of protecting the reefs from overfishing. Describing the nation's coral reef system as being "in peril," administration officials voiced their intent to ban fishing on at least one-fifth of US coral reefs and establish sustainable management systems for the remainder.

The US Coral Reef Task Force, created by President Clinton in 1998, delivered the recommendations earlier this month (March) in a National Action Plan. The task force includes officials from 11 federal agencies as well as several state and territorial governments.

Less than 3% of the US' 17,000 sq. km of coral reefs are presently designated as no-take reserves. The task force estimated that 10% of the nation's coral reefs are already degraded beyond recovery, while another two-thirds are under severe environmental stress, with the two main stressors being overfishing and pollution.

MPAs, said the action plan, "may represent the nation's best -- and perhaps last -- hope to save these invaluable [coral reef] ecosystems from further decline."

Mapping of reefs

The action plan calls for the production of comprehensive digital maps of all US coral reefs for use in characterizing habitats, designing monitoring programs, and planning regional conservation measures such as MPAs. According to the task force, the eventual network of coral reef MPAs should include a full representation of all coral reefs and associated habitats in US waters.

More than 90% of US coral reef habitats are in the Western Pacific (Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands), with the remainder located in the Caribbean. The proposed establishment of no-take reserves would likely show a similar distribution, according to task force participants, with the large majority of no-take sites being located in the Western Pacific.

The task force intends for the no-take reserves to be created through multi-stakeholder processes involving consensus decision making, similar to the Tortugas 2000 process that yielded an "ecological reserve" in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary last year ([MPA News 1:1](#)).

"In general, Tortugas 2000 is a great example of how this could be done," said Roger Griffis, an environmental policy advisor for the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Noting that such consensus processes can be lengthy, Griffis said, "They do take time, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. There are limits to how much you can streamline them, because you want the input of the community."

The 20% trend

The task force's 20% target for no-take reserves reflects a growing political trend -- advocated by several fisheries scientists, particularly in the US -- for adopting that figure as a precaution, pending further research on fishing's impacts. The Bahamas adopted it in its proposal in January to set aside 20%, or one-fifth, of its waters as no-take reserves ([MPA News 1:5](#)).

One-fifth of the US' total coral reef habitat would be 3,400 sq. km, divided among multiple no-take reserves. For reference, the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary in the US is 12,400 sq. km; Australia's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is 350,000 sq. km.

Although coral reef habitats represent just a small fraction of all US marine waters, the task force's plan is one of the first coordinated, inter-agency efforts in the US to set up a networked system of MPAs. Scientists and environmental groups have called for a similar coordinated system to oversee the creation of MPAs in all US marine habitats, not just coral reefs (see box

at end of this article).

Administration officials are looking to share lessons learned from coral reef MPA-related efforts in US waters with other MPA programs, inside and outside of US borders. The action plan calls for an evaluation of traditional and community-based coral reef conservation efforts, particularly in the US islands, and to support sustainable practices. It also calls for strengthening international cooperation among countries with coral reef habitats to conserve global biodiversity and enhance the viability of reef systems worldwide.

The Coral Reef Task Force's National Action Plan and supporting documents are available for downloading, at <http://coralreef.gov/WG-reports.html>.

For more information:

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Scientists, NGOs Call for Creation of National MPA Council in US

The US federal government should create a permanent, interagency council to set standards, and seek opportunities, for the establishment of marine protected areas in the country, according to a group of scientists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who made their recommendation to the Clinton Administration in February.

The group also called on the US to establish regional MPA councils to begin the process of building MPA networks, and for the nation eventually to set aside at least 20% of each marine ecotype as no-take reserves. Two NGOs -- the Marine Conservation Biology Institute and The Cousteau Society -- convened the work group, which included a dozen natural and social scientists from inside and outside the US.

The group noted existing federal and state initiatives to create effective systems of MPAs, but urged the federal government to integrate the various efforts to protect the nation's waters as a whole. Unlike Australia's cooperative effort (including commonwealth, state and territory agencies) to create a national representative system of MPAs, the US has not attempted to coordinate the myriad MPA-related initiatives of its federal, state, and local governments.

To download a copy of the work group's Call for Presidential Action, go to <http://www.mcbi.org/>.

For more information:

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