

U.S. Initiatives for the Coral Reef Task Force and Marine Protected Areas

Susan White
Marine Resource Specialist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
National Wildlife Refuge System Headquarters
Arlington, VA

Phone: (703) 358-2415
Email: susan_white@fws.gov

This presentation highlights the Coral Reef Task Force conservation initiative and the Marine Protected Area initiative and their relation to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

U.S. Coral Reef Task Force: Coral reefs are among the most diverse and biologically complex ecosystems on earth. These ‘rainforests of the sea’ provide economic and environmental services to millions of people as areas of natural beauty and recreation, sources of food, jobs, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and shoreline protection. Now under threat from multiple stresses that are overwhelming their natural resilience, coral reefs are deteriorating worldwide at alarming rates. An estimated 25% of the world’s reefs have already been lost and 60% are threatened by bleaching, disease, and a variety of human activities including shoreline development, polluted runoff from agricultural and land-use practices, ship groundings, over-harvesting, destructive fishing, and global climate change. The trend in coral reef health is downward, and these ancient ecosystems are in peril.

In response to this growing global environmental crisis, the Coral Reef Protection Executive Order 13089 was issued on June 11, 1998. The Executive Order established the *United States Coral Reef Task Force* (CRTF), which includes the major federal agencies responsible for aspects of coral reef conservation, plus our state and territorial partners. Through the policies set forth in the Executive Order, the federal government was directed to strengthen its stewardship of the Nation’s reef ecosystems and coral reefs around the world.

Marine Protected Areas: In the United States alone, 53% of the total population lives on the 17% of land in the coastal zone. Increasing human impacts to the marine ecosystem are taking their toll. Symptoms of a fundamental change in ocean life are being witnessed globally. Increased coastal erosion and runoff of nutrients, pesticides, and toxins are contributing to rapidly declining water quality. Incidence of harmful, toxic algal blooms are increasing nationwide. More than 37% of assessed U.S. marine fish populations are overfished, with similar losses internationally. Roughly 27% of the world’s coral reefs are effectively lost. Marine mammals, reptiles, and birds that rely on the sea are suffering from disease, loss of food, and loss of habitat. Effects from global climate change and rising sea level are compounding these stresses.

Increasingly convincing scientific evidence is fueling a national and international awareness that ‘geographic

areas' of marine protection - rather than simple single species management regimes - are the best hope for slowing the decreasing state of marine ecosystem health. This "ecosystem approach" to conservation supports the creation of a network of marine protected areas within a biogeographic region, connected by the watersheds, larval dispersal, and juvenile or adult migration. The most protective type of MPA is often called a Marine Reserve. Marine Reserves are special areas of the sea that are completely protected from all extractive activities.

Coordination between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Department of the Interior to address the Nation's marine protection was initiated with Presidential Executive Order 13158 on Marine Protected Areas. This Initiative is preparing to inventory the existing types, locations, and degrees of protection afforded to areas of the marine, estuarine, and coastal waters of the United States; including estuary-type areas of the Great Lakes. Areas inventoried will include those with federal, state, local, and tribal protections. Upon compilation of the MPA List, analysis will be conducted to identify gaps in needed protections. Enhancing needed protections at these gaps will be encouraged. Coordination of regional or ecosystem-level governments and interests will also be encouraged to address needs at the local level. There are an initial 163 National Wildlife Refuges identified on the MPA inventory (see attached candidate list). The EO also directs federal agencies, in the actions they authorize, fund, or carry out to 'avoid harm' to marine protected areas, to the maximum extent practicable.