

SIERRA CLUB COMMENTS FOR THE U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE – MAY, 2006

Task Force Chairs, members and fellow participants: My name is Judith Lang, and I am pleased to present comments on behalf of the Sierra Club's Coral Reef Working Group. David Raney, who is unable to attend this meeting, sends his best regards.

The National Action Plan, adopted March 2000, was described as **“a comprehensive road map for federal, state, territorial and local action to reverse the worldwide decline and loss of coral reefs.”** Sadly this goal remains elusive and unfulfilled. More of the same is not going to cut it. We need the underwater equivalent of basketball's “full court press” to reverse the deterioration of reefs now occurring around the world, and most especially in US waters.

The Task Force can justifiably report to Congress that significant progress has been made on most of the 13 goals of the National Action Strategy, particularly the first three goals for mapping, monitoring, and research. Yet the most recent scorecard, the 500-page *State of Coral Reef Ecosystems of the United States and Pacific Freely Associated States*, published in 2005, shows that we have failed the “No Reef Left Behind” test. This is especially true for the reefs of Florida, for on page 192 is the following cry for help: **“Overall, immediate action is needed to curtail alarming declines in coral reef condition throughout Florida.”** Note the clear sense of urgency, and emphasis on the need for **action**.

The agenda today included a report on the Florida Reef Resiliency Program. The concept of resiliency has received much attention lately, especially as a means for responding to the global threat of climate change and associated coral reef bleaching. These threats disproportionately impact the inhabitants of small islands all around the globe, who are among the least responsible for rising sea surface temperatures that are exemplified by NOAA's report today on recent events in the tropical northwestern Atlantic, and where post-bleaching outbreaks of disease are still occurring, at least in the eastern Caribbean. A key element of the resiliency strategy is establishing networks of marine protected areas (MPAs) designed to maximize recovery of coral reef ecosystems after bleaching events. However, as Rod Salm of the Nature Conservancy (TNC) also emphasized in his talk at your Palau meeting in November 2005, MPAs are not the only answer. This is especially true for reefs within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, for which regulations have been in place since 1997. In the context of Florida's reefs and associated Local Action Strategies, we emphasize that the search for resiliency must be in addition to, and coordinated with, high priority actions to address all land-based sources of harmful pollution, adverse impacts of local coastal development, overfishing, and other stressors.

The best strategy for optimizing protection, resiliency, and restoration of coral reefs is with a comprehensive approach to minimize the variety of stressors, from the local to the global, land-based as well marine, so that coral reefs are less likely to deteriorate in the first place, and more likely to recover when impacted.

We must ask why the reefs of the Florida Keys continue to deteriorate despite being afforded MPA protection, and what actions might be taken to make this protection more effective. Why hasn't Billy Causey been able to save the reefs he so obviously loves despite his international prominence as a spokesperson for this resource? Perhaps in large part it is because he and other resource managers lack direct authority over many actions that adversely impact coral reefs, in particular those from the land and coastal zone. We need to acknowledge that ultimately the key resource managers under our system are the President, Congress, Supreme Court, and federal agencies like those represented here today that carry out national policies, as well as their counterparts at the state, commonwealth, territorial, and local levels. And, ultimately, individuals elect leaders and advocate policies: we are responsible for our own behaviors. It is neither fair, nor effective, to restrict our definition of “resource manager” to those few individuals with direct responsibility for “managing” MPAs and other areas with coral-reef resources. Along with strong support for coral reef conservation from the grassroots, and responses to that support from the highest levels of government, committed leadership will be needed at all levels to carry out corrective actions.

Goal 11 of the National Action Plan does in fact state that this Nation will **“Exercise global leadership through commitment to and collaboration with domestic and international partners to protect and conserve coral reefs and associated ecosystems globally.”** If, as TNC has stated, **“Climate change may represent the single greatest threat to coral reefs worldwide,”** then “global leadership” must include taking responsibility for reducing our nation's emissions that contribute so dramatically to climate change. We cannot be content to just **“Address the impact of global change, coral bleaching, and reef health on reefs and people,”** as called for in Objective 5 of Goal 11. We must act to reduce the major **sources** of those impacts—which includes the over-consumption of global resources by us who are here today, and most of our neighbors.

Much effort is being devoted to education and outreach in support of coral reef conservation, but as demonstrated by the need for tomorrow's workshop on **“Human Dimensions: How It Can Inform Coral Reef Management,”** simply providing facts, diagnoses and prescriptions is not sufficient to transform the attitudes and behavior of individuals or societies. Casual observations of the annual televised Super Bowl competition support this assertion. No beer commercial contains a chemical analysis of its particular brew; rather, their focus often seems to be on body chemistries. Should we repackage our education and outreach messages and images to portray the notion that protecting corals will greatly enhance one's sex life? Or will we find the strength and resiliency within ourselves to “step up to the plate,” and more closely map, monitor and manage our own actions before Nature does so for us in the forms of further coral reef declines, and more Katrina-like catastrophes?

Thank you for the opportunity to present these comments.