

Implementation of the USCRTF Framework for Action

Coral reefs are one of the world's most biologically diverse ecosystems. While covering only about 1/10th of 1 percent of the ocean floor, they provide habitat for over 25 percent of all marine species. Not only do coral reefs house enormous biodiversity, they also provide economic and environmental services to millions of people as sources of food, income, coastal protection, and recreation.

The United States is one of many nations around the world working to protect, restore, and sustainably use coral reef ecosystems. In 1998, Presidential Executive Order 13089 established the United States Coral Reef Task Force (USCRTF) to lead U.S. efforts to preserve and protect coral reef ecosystems. Co-chaired by DOC through NOAA and DOI, the USCRTF membership includes senior leaders from 12 Federal agencies, two states, three territories, two commonwealths, and the three Freely Associated States. To implement the policies and requirements of the Executive Order, the USCRTF provides a forum for coordinating planning and action among Federal agencies, state and territorial governments, and non-governmental partners.

The USCRTF developed the first U.S. National Action Plan to Conserve Coral Reefs (2000) and the National Coral Reef Action Strategy (2002) to identify national and international coral reef conservation goals and objectives. In 2002, the USCRTF developed place-based Local Action Strategies (LAS) to address priority threats at the local, jurisdictional level. The LAS approach has allowed the USCRTF member states and territories to tailor their goals and activities to address prioritized local issues and implement on-the-ground action with increased support from federal USCRTF members.

In the ten years since its inception, the USCRTF has taken a variety of actions to reduce key threats and adverse impacts to coral reef ecosystems through the actions of its members. In particular, the USCRTF has maximized conservation efforts, despite limited funding and resources, through joint planning and priority setting, created a range of effective partnerships, and developed needed capacity at the national and local levels, as well as in select developing countries. The tangible value of the USCRTF is its ability to facilitate consensus approaches to:

- Foster Partnership
- Identify Priorities
- Strengthen Coordination and Collaborative Action
- Increase Financial and Technical Resources
- Promote Efficiency
- Improve Effectiveness

Despite success in these efforts, coral reefs world-wide are deteriorating at alarming rates. Overfishing, climate change, ocean acidification, pollution, sedimentation, destructive fishing practices and coastal development are just a few human-induced causes of reef destruction. Current estimates categorize 70 percent of the world's coral reefs as threatened, and 20 percent of those are believed to be damaged beyond repair. Climate change, and in some areas

development, pollution and sedimentation, threaten to overwhelm the successes that have been achieved at many US jurisdiction coral reefs.

In recognition of the imperiled state of coral reef ecosystems, the USCRTF developed the 2008 USCRTF Framework for Action, which states:

It is clear that the USCRTF, with partners, must significantly increase our collective effort to address the factors over which we can exercise control. The USCRTF must take immediate action to respond to these threats and, in turn, seek to sustain coral reef ecosystems and the communities that depend upon them.

As outlined in the 2008 Framework for Action, there are stressors to coral reef ecosystems that require immediate local and national action to stem further degradation and to reduce their vulnerability to global threats. To do this, the USCRTF and member agencies must focus effort on the most serious and sustained impacts to coral reefs at the local scale resulting from:

- Poor or declining water quality,
- Adverse effects of inappropriate fishing activity,
- Inappropriate and uncontrolled coastal development, and
- Direct physical damage to coral reefs.

The USCRTF also recognizes that *global* threats of unchecked greenhouse gas emissions (and the shortfall of mitigation and adaptation strategies to deal with the direct and indirect impacts of climate change) include:

- Rising sea temperatures,
- Rising sea-levels,
- Increasing intensity of storms, and
- Increasing ocean acidification.

To implement the Framework for Action the USCRTF, members and partners, should collectively “plan globally and act locally” to address both the local stressors and the global threats facing coral reef ecosystems, in order to achieve solutions that integrate sound science and pertinent social factors. Accordingly, the USCRTF members agree to support the following specific actions:

Adopt and refine action plans that target the priority stressors and threats affecting coral reef ecosystems.

The USCRTF is an effective national planning and coordination body. However, identifying place-based conservation goals and targets, and establishing performance measures across the national to local continuum that incorporate the diversity of threats being addressed, while tracking progress towards achieving National Action Plan goals, is a persistent challenge. The lack of performance measures that capture this progress impedes our ability to assess the overall impact that USCRTF or member actions have for conserving coral reef ecosystems. To address this challenge, the USCRTF will:

- Refine the focus of the USCRTF to address key priority issues that require or benefit from broad USCRTF engagement; Work more effectively to promote coordination across agencies to implement more geographically specific and integrated activities; Develop targeted assessments and action plans by drawing upon the assets of USCRTF member agencies and partners, including current literature, existing strategic plans, Local Action Strategies, implementation plans, and project plans; Engage social scientists and environmental economists in the planning and assessment work to better inform project scoping and reporting phases of projects to track project-specific and cumulative results.
- Use the USCRTF to take action on priority stressors and threats in locations where leveraging of member resources could serve to advance action.
- Adopt a definition of success, a process for measuring results and a framework for adaptive management of coral reef ecosystems (and related human behaviors).

Coordinate USCRTF Member Authority to Reach National and Local Conservation Goals

The USCRTF provides a forum for members and partners to explore how the use of their diverse mandates, authorities, and programs can be best utilized to reach common national and local conservation goals, as well as international goals. To reach these goals, The USCRTF aims to:

- Coordinate and strengthen Federal, state and local USCRTF policies and authorities.
- Rejuvenate and encourage local engagement and support community actions that are in keeping with USCRTF goals.
- Better utilize individual member authorities, programs, and expertise to respond more effectively to those threats that the USCRTF has the capacity to address.
- Assess current authorities to address threats to coral reefs, gaps in those authorities, and other factors that support or impede efforts to stem further decline of coral reef ecosystems.
- Coordinate and strengthen U.S. efforts with those of international partners to assist developing countries in their efforts to address threats to coral reef ecosystems.

Prioritize, fund, and implement the necessary science to support coral reef management and conservation goals

The overarching goal of strategic research on coral reef ecosystems is to provide managers with the information and tools necessary to ensure sustainable use and improve the integrity of these ecosystems. Two types of research are needed to address gaps and support improved management measures. Strategic research will enhance national, regional, and local capabilities to measure, understand, analyze, and forecast ecological change in response to stressors. Targeted research will answer specific questions and provide coastal and ocean managers with additional tools to effectively manage and protect local coral reef resources.

The USCRTF should undertake the following practices to promote the capacity of members and partners to deliver strategic monitoring, research, modeling, and tools that aid decision-making:

- Instill joint project “ownership” between scientists and managers as key players in the process of identifying and mitigating priority stressors and threats.
- Promote effective collaboration between natural and social scientists in project planning and integration through to project completion and information delivery.

- Develop a prioritized and coordinated focus on the research USCRTF members conduct and fund, both strategic and targeted.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of management actions designed to mitigate negative impacts.
- Provide a single prioritized list of applied research needs for which Federal agency and other partner assistance is needed. The USCRTF can utilize its meetings to identify national, regional, and local research needs.
- Assist jurisdiction members to utilize and implement new tools and technologies to address local impacts.
- Ensure that local knowledge and expertise is incorporated into research, planning and management initiatives.
- Share management needs and research findings. Help ensure that relevant science is translated and communicated such that managers and policy makers can understand and can help drive management action.

Enhance communication, outreach, and education

An informed, engaged public is fundamental to achieving the goals of the National Action Plan. However, reducing human impacts on coral reef ecosystems requires more than information-sharing. It requires changing the human behaviors, beliefs, and decision-making criteria that contribute to coral reef decline. This approach requires ongoing dialogue with stakeholders and decision makers, regular progress assessments to determine public understanding of the values of and threats to coral reef ecosystems, and ongoing communications based on these assessments and dialogue. The USCRTF will enhance communication, outreach and education with the following approaches:

- Increase key policymakers' awareness and understanding (at the Federal and local level) of the ecological, cultural, and socioeconomic importance of coral reef ecosystems and the threats to these ecosystems.
- Foster champions for coral reef issues at the national, local and international levels to help generate interest and action for coral reef conservation.
- Motivate behavioral change through the use of social networking tools and approaches.
- Keep insights and perspectives fresh by rotating positions and key participants within the USCRTF (e.g. naming a jurisdictional co-chair).