

Endangered Corals

Protecting Corals Under the Endangered Species Act

22 corals are protected as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act

In 2014, the National Marine Fisheries Service added 20 corals to the list of threatened and endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. These corals joined two coral species that were protected under the Act in 2006.

Now, seven species of corals are listed in the Atlantic Ocean and 15 in the Pacific Ocean.

Caribbean and Florida listed corals: Staghorn (*Acropora cervicornis*), Elkhorn (*A. palmata*), Pillar (*Dendrogyra cylindrus*), Lobed Star (*Orbicella annularis*), Mountainous Star (*O. faveolata*), Boulder Star (*O. franksi*), and Rough Cactus (*Mycetophyllia ferox*)

Indo-Pacific region listed corals: *Acropora globiceps*, *A. jacquelineae*, *A. lokani*, *A. pharaonis*, *A. retusa*, *A. rudis*, *A. speciosa*, *A. tenella*, *Anacropora spinosa*, *Euphyllia paradivisa*, *Isopora crateriformis*, *Montipora australiensis*, *Pavona diffluens*, *Porites napopora*, and *Seriatorpora aculeata*

Climate change is the most significant threat to these key ocean species. Scientists predict that by 2050, 97 percent of coral reefs will experience severe thermal stress, likely resulting in massive coral bleaching and mortality. Increased CO₂ levels will result in significant ocean acidification, putting additional stress on corals. Many coral reefs have already declined substantially: coral cover in the Caribbean has declined from 50 percent in the 1970s to less than 10 percent now, and similarly from 50 percent to 20 percent in the Indo-Pacific. Corals need relief from each of these threats to survive.

The dangers facing corals are already recognized around the world. All of the species protected under the ESA are also protected on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, and all have been classified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List as either vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered. The strong protections of the Endangered Species Act will provide a much-needed safety net for the conservation of coral reefs in the waters surrounding the United States.

What does listing mean?

The ESA provides tools to conserve corals in U.S. waters, especially by ensuring that federal government activities minimize harm to corals.

How does listing help corals?

- When corals are degraded or destroyed, losses include reduced shoreline protection; loss of habitat for commercially and recreationally important fish; and lost jobs and business through reduced tourism and recreation.
- Coral protections can result in ecosystem-wide benefits by improving water quality, reducing pollution, and restoring degraded ecosystems. Most importantly, the federal government must consult with biologists to minimize the harm of federally-approved or funded activities on corals.
- Consultation also applies to government actions that harm corals through significant greenhouse gas emissions that increase global warming. This could result in emissions reductions that help protect corals.

How will listing affect local communities?

- Endangered Species Act programs complement existing reef management and, through the recovery planning process, provide coordination, evaluation, and funding for coral conservation.
- Listing typically attracts new research and funding for a species, which will improve science and reef management.
- Costs of implementing the conservation programs required by the Act will be distributed nationally, and benefits will be concentrated in regions with corals, improving coral management in those areas.
- People can still swim, surf, snorkel, fish and enjoy the ocean and coral reefs. Listing only prohibits people from harming or injuring protected corals.



Jim Maragos / USEWS Pacific

The Endangered Species Act works

The Endangered Species Act is the strongest law for protecting biodiversity passed by any nation.

- **It prevented the extinction of 99% of more than 1,400 listed species.** According to one study, 227 listed plants and animals would have disappeared by 2006 without the Act's protections.
- **It has achieved recovery goals through management and planning.** A 2012 study concluded that the Endangered Species Act has been successful in recovering listed species; 90% of sampled species achieved the recovery rates targeted in their recovery plans.
- **It has protected critical habitat in order to improve species survival and recovery.** Species with designated critical habitat are more than twice as likely to be increasing in abundance than those without protected habitat. NMFS will begin the critical habitat designation process after the listing process is complete.

Two Caribbean corals that were listed as “threatened” in 2006—elkhorn and staghorn corals—have already benefited from Endangered Species Act protections. These corals received almost 3,000 square miles of protected habitat. On average, about 25 projects per year have triggered consultation with federal biologists aimed at minimizing harm to corals. As a result, federal agencies have been required to modify and mitigate projects to reduce harms to these corals. As a result of Endangered Species Act protection, common-sense modifications were implemented to address harm to coral reefs. The ESA prompted the installation of mooring buoys to avoid anchoring on reefs, helped fund monitoring and educational programs, and funded the removal of marine debris.



NOAA

NO JEOPARDY

- Prohibits federal activities from jeopardizing corals or harming critical habitat.

NO TAKE

- Makes it unlawful to kill or harm endangered corals.

CRITICAL HABITAT

- Regulation of activities that impair water quality or harm coral habitat.

RECOVERY PLANNING

- Science-based recovery planning with specific management and research actions aimed to help corals survive and recover.

PUBLIC AWARENESS

- Promotes greater awareness about threats to corals, and opportunities that give the public a voice in coral conservation.

Conserving corals is good for the United States

Coral reefs worldwide have declined significantly due to global warming, local pollution, and other threats. The oceans around the United States have some of the most incredible coral reefs, and they are now at risk.

Protecting corals under the Endangered Species Act will reduce threats to corals and provide federal funding and management. Coastal areas depend on healthy coral reefs for fisheries, tourism, shoreline protection, and jobs. Protecting these corals is about protecting the natural heritage of these coastal regions.

For more information visit the National Marine Fisheries Service's webpage on corals:

http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/stories/2014/08/corals_listing.html