

NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE

CRITICAL HABITAT DESIGNATIONS for Elkhorn (*Acropora palmata*) & Staghorn (*A. cervicornis*) Corals

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why did NOAA Fisheries Service designate critical habitat for threatened corals?

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires the Federal government to designate “critical habitat” for any species it lists under the ESA. NOAA Fisheries Service listed elkhorn and staghorn corals as threatened under the ESA on May 9, 2006. Further, the final rule satisfies a court order resulting from a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity. The court order required NOAA Fisheries finalize the critical habitat designations by November 30, 2008.

What is critical habitat?

The ESA defines “critical habitat” as: (1) specific areas within the geographical area occupied by the species at the time of listing, that contain the physical or biological features essential to the species’ conservation, and which may require special management considerations or protection; and (2) specific areas outside the geographical area occupied by the species if the agency determines that the area itself is essential for conservation.

Where is critical habitat for threatened corals?

The four areas designated as critical habitat for threatened corals are: (1) Florida area; (2) Puerto Rico area; (3) St. Thomas/St. John area; and (4) St. Croix area (see shaded areas on maps to left). The critical habitat for threatened corals includes water depths up to 98 feet. Within these areas, the feature essential to the conservation of threatened corals is natural consolidated hard substrate or dead coral skeleton that is free from fleshy and turf macroalgae cover and sediment cover to maximize the potential for successful recruitment and population growth.

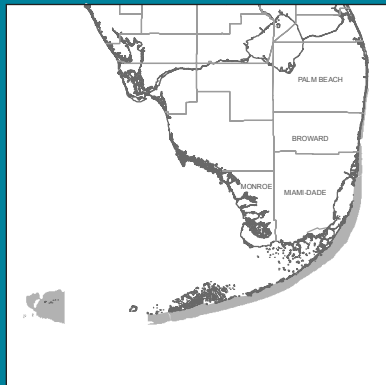
What does the designation of these areas as critical habitat do?

The designation of these areas as critical habitat for threatened corals *does not create a closed area, marine protected area, refuge, wilderness reserve, preservation, or other conservation area*; nor does the designation affect land ownership. Federal agencies that undertake, fund, or permit activities that may affect these designated critical habitat areas are required to consult with NOAA Fisheries Service to ensure that their actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

Is the feature essential to the conservation of listed corals present everywhere within all areas designated as critical habitat?

No. Within critical habitat areas, the designation focuses on one feature essential to the corals’ conservation: substrate of suitable quality and availability, in water depths of 30 meters or less, to support successful recruitment and population growth. This includes areas of exposed hard substrate and dead coral skeleton free of sediment cover and turf and fleshy macroalgae cover. Natural areas of loose sediment, fleshy macroalgal covered hardbottom, or seagrasses do not provide the feature essential to the conservation of threatened corals. Only activities that may affect this feature would be subject to the ESA’s consultation requirement for Federal agencies. Man-made structures such as boat ramps, docks, pilings, maintained channels, or marinas are not included in critical habitat.

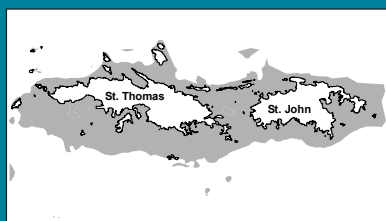
(1) Florida area



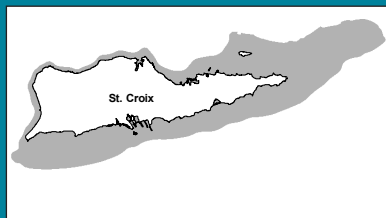
(2) Puerto Rico area



(3) St. Thomas/St. John area



(4) St. Croix area





What are the economic impacts of the designation?

The economic impacts of the designation are discussed at length in the Final 4(b)(2) Report (available at the website listed at the bottom of this page). The primary impacts of the critical habitat designation result from the requirement that Federal agencies ensure that their actions are not likely to result in the destruction or adverse modification of critical habitat. Private citizens, small businesses, small nonprofit organizations, and small governmental jurisdictions may be affected by the designation if they engage in activities that affect the feature essential to the conservation of listed corals and if they receive funding or authorization for their activities from a Federal agency. The limitations to the type and amount of existing information do not allow us to predict the total costs and benefits of the designation. No particular areas are expected to incur a disproportionate share of the costs of the critical habitat designation.

What are the benefits of designating critical habitat?

Designating critical habitat for these species is important for several reasons. It informs the public of areas that are crucial to the conservation of the species. It identifies where conservation actions will be most effective. It helps ensure that Federal government activities are planned to avoid destruction and modification of these important habitats, and it contributes to the continued existence of these two species and eventually to their increased abundances.

Why didn't NOAA Fisheries include water temperature, ocean acidity, and good water quality as features essential to the conservation of threatened corals?

As stated in the proposed critical habitat rule, other than the substrate feature, NOAA Fisheries Service determined that no other aspect of the corals' environment is appropriate to include as a basis for the critical habitat designation. Rather, NOAA Fisheries Service determined that increased water temperature and ocean acidity are more appropriately viewed as sources of impacts that can harm the corals directly. Therefore impacts from these stressors will be analyzed through the jeopardy analysis required under ESA section 7. Last, some aspects of water quality are included within the definition of the substrate essential feature. Substrate free from turf and fleshy macroalgae cover and sediment cover would encompass water quality sufficiently free of nutrients and sediments. Therefore, Federal activities that impact water quality by increasing nutrients or sediments may affect the essential substrate feature, and would require ESA section 7 consultation.

Who do I contact for more information?

The Southeast Region Protected Resources Division is the lead in developing the rules and all subsequent management actions for these species. For more information, please contact:

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<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/esa/acropora.htm>