

# Proposed Critical Habitat Designations for Threatened Elkhorn & Staghorn Corals Frequently Asked Questions

## WHY IS NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE PROPOSING TO DESIGNATE CRITICAL HABITAT FOR THREATENED CORALS?

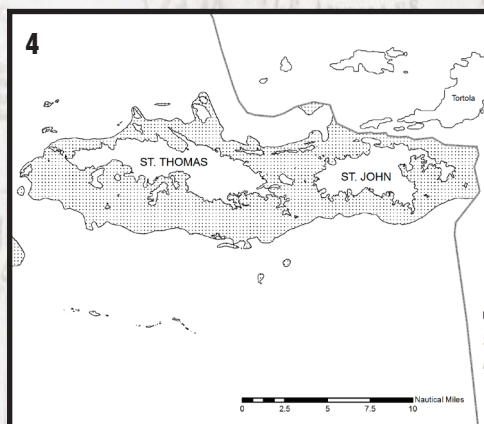
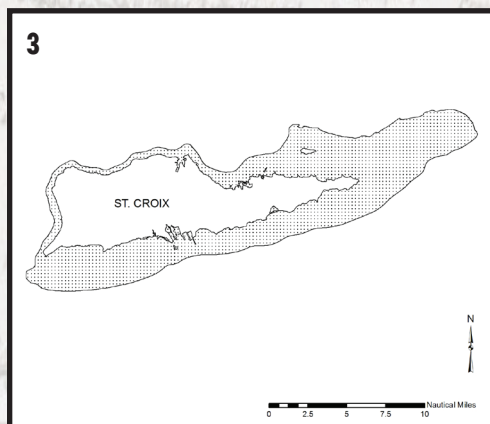
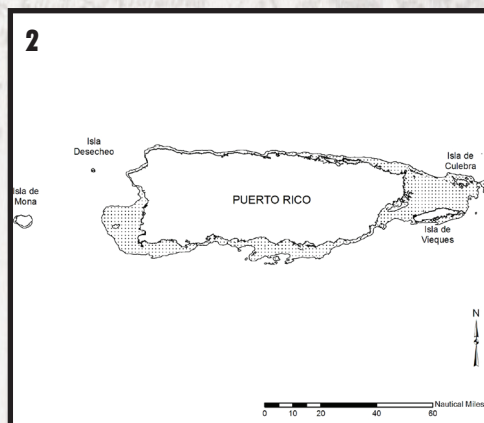
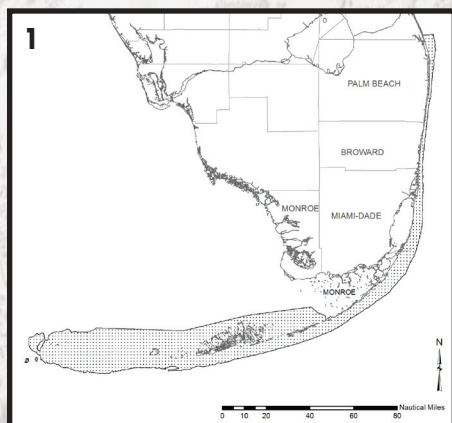
The Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires the Federal government to designate "critical habitat" for any species it lists under the ESA. NOAA Fisheries Service listed elkhorn and staghorn corals as threatened under the ESA on May 9, 2006. Further, the proposed rule satisfies a court order resulting from a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity. The court order requires NOAA Fisheries Service to propose critical habitat for elkhorn and staghorn corals by January 31, 2008 and issue a final determination 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 BEING PROPOSED FOR LISTED CORALS?

The four areas proposed for designation include: (1) Florida area; (2) Puerto Rico area; (3) St. Croix area; and (4) St. Thomas/St. John area. The proposed critical habitat for threatened corals includes all areas in water depths shallower than 30 meters. Within these areas, the feature essential to the conservation of threatened corals is natural consolidated hardbottom or dead coral skeleton that is free from fleshy macroalgae cover and sediment cover to maximize the potential for successful recruitment and population growth. Other features of the corals' environment, such as water temperature, are more appropriately viewed as sources of impacts or stressors that can harm the corals, rather than habitat features that provide a conservation function. Therefore impacts from this stressor will be analyzed under the prohibitions on take extended through the 4(d) rule.



Maps are for informational purposes only.

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## **IS THE FEATURE ESSENTIAL TO LISTED CORAL CONSERVATION LOCATED EVERYWHERE WITHIN THE PROPOSED 4,931 SQUARE MILES (12,569 SQ KM) OF CRITICAL HABITAT?**

No. Man-made structures such as boat ramps, docks, pilings, maintained channels, or marinas are not part of the proposed critical habitat designation. Within the critical habitat areas, the proposed designation focuses on one feature that is 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 hardbottom and dead coral skeleton that are free from sediment cover 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.

## **HOW DID NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE IDENTIFY THESE AREAS AS POTENTIAL CRITICAL HABITAT AREAS?**

NOAA Fisheries Service used the best available science to identify areas that contain the features essential to the conservation of threatened corals. This involved gathering information on the natural history, habitat needs, and all known locations of these two coral species. Additionally, information received from the public during the listing process and the economic, national security, and other relevant impacts of designation were considered.

## **ARE ANY AREAS PROPOSED FOR EXCLUSION FROM THE DESIGNATION?**

One military site, comprising approximately 47 square miles (123 sq km), is proposed for exclusion because of national security impacts. The Department of the Navy identified several specific activities within Naval Air Station Key West and associated annexes that would be adversely impacted by a critical habitat designation. These activities include: military training and readiness; access to, management of, and maintenance of piers, harbors, and waterfront instrumentation; and support for refueling or docking of Federal vessels.

## **WHAT WOULD THE DESIGNATION OF CRITICAL HABITAT FOR THREATENED CORALS DO?**

The designation of critical habitat would not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. Federal agencies that undertake, fund, or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the NOAA Fisheries Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

## **WHAT WOULD BE THE ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF THE DESIGNATION?**

The primary impacts of the proposed critical habitat designation result from the ESA requirement that Federal agencies ensure that their actions are not likely to result in the destruction or adverse modification of critical habitat. Small businesses, small nonprofit organizations, and small governmental jurisdictions may be affected by the proposed 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 such activities from a Federal agency. The economic impacts of the proposed rule are discussed at length in the Draft 4(b)(2) Report (available at the website listed on the left side of this page).

## **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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