

Testimony of Katherine Andrews  
Director, Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas  
Florida Department of Environmental Protection

Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Resources  
Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans  
March 1, 2005

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members, good afternoon. My name is Katherine Andrews and I am the Director of Coastal and Aquatic Managed Areas for the State of Florida Department of Environmental Protection. I am here on behalf of Governor Jeb Bush. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about coral reef conservation.

Florida is home to the Florida Keys, the third largest barrier reef in the world and the only barrier reef in the United States. But our coral reefs do not stop in the Keys; they extend up the southeast Florida coast offshore of Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, three of the most densely populated counties in America and home to over five million people. The reefs of Florida also receive millions of visitors every year who come to scuba dive, snorkel, and fish on our reefs. Needless to say, with our population density and the fact that Florida is probably the most accessible place in the United States to come enjoy these remarkable resources, we face a myriad of challenges in managing these resources.

Even though coral reefs are in our own backyard we do not take these resources for granted. We know and fully appreciate that coral reefs are some of the most remarkable habitats on earth, and Florida takes our stewardship of these resources seriously. And in addition to the resource value of coral reefs, they are an important economic engine for our economy. The reefs of Florida have an asset value of billions of dollars and help provide tens of thousands of jobs. To protect these resources, we have undertaken numerous initiatives and efforts to conserve the Florida Keys and the reefs off southeast Florida.

First, Florida is a partner with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in the management of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. I am appointed by the Governor and Cabinet as the co-Trustee of the Sanctuary. The Sanctuary is a perfect example of ecosystem-based management in action. It involves overlapping jurisdictions of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, NOAA, the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida state parks, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Parks. Even though it is a veritable alphabet soup of agencies, it works because the various government programs are organized around the needs of the resources; the resources managers do not have to tie themselves into knots trying to fit in a government program created for the nation as a whole.

Another important component of the success of the Keys Sanctuary is the involvement of the community. We have an active Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC) made of representatives from the various major stakeholder groups, such as tourism, diving, recreational fishing, commercial fishing and conservation. The Council meets on a regular basis, hears presentations, debates the issues and often passes resolutions for the managers' consideration. The community is actively involved in the management of these resources, which is the only way to ensure the implementation of the management actions.

Another major conservation success for the Florida coral reefs was when Governor Bush helped create the Tortugas Ecological Reserves, one of the largest underwater refuges in the world. While more study needs to be performed, the initial monitoring results from the Tortugas is very promising.

Florida is also reaching out to international partners to spearhead new ways of looking at coral reef management issue. In December of last year, Florida and NOAA entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority of Australia on coral reef resilience. Our resilience effort will locate and identify which reefs are the most resilient. We will then seek to determine what factors help to make a coral reef more resilient. Is it location? Is it shading? Is it genetics? Once we better understand all of the combinations of factors that make coral reefs more resilient to resist the multiple stressors they encounter, we hope to tailor our management strategies to promote that resilience. By working in concert on resilience with the Marine Park Authority, we can learn from each other and we can ensure our efforts are complimentary and we aren't both reinventing our own wheels.

Florida has also been actively involved in the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force. Florida was greatly encouraged by the direction the Task Force took in 2002 when it passed the Puerto Rico Resolution. In this resolution the states, territories and commonwealths agreed to develop Local Action Strategies (LAS) to develop conservation projects to address the highest priority threats for the coral reefs in their individual jurisdictions. The benefits of these LAS plans are numerous: they are locally-developed so the community helps to develop and implement them, they are on-the-ground strategies so work is actually being accomplished to conserve or protect the coral reefs, and even though they are locally developed they still

address the top priorities of the National Action Strategy Plan. In other words, local communities' actions help to meet national goals. This is a great example of the way government should work.

Governor Bush responded to the action-oriented Puerto Rico resolution by recommending to the Florida Legislature that it match the federal coral reef conservation grant dollar for dollar to implement the Local Action Strategies. Our Legislature passed that recommendation so we can now implement most of the planned projects. Florida has also used the development of its Local Action Strategies as an opportunity to engage hundreds of citizens and stakeholders. Through a wide-ranging public workshop process, we now have a plan with local community buy-in that lays out the conservation activities for next three years.

In the Puerto Rico Resolution the federal agency members agreed to aid in the implementation of these Local Action Strategies. The states, territory and commonwealth jurisdictions have now developed their plans, and now we need increased help from the federal government to implement these plans. And it is coming. President Bush has recommended an increase of \$2.7 million dollars this year to implement the Local Action Strategies. Florida applauds this increase and recommends that in future years additional funding be directed to Local Action Strategy for full implementation of coming years. It is the most cost efficient money Congress can send on coral reef conservation.

The involvement of the federal agency Task Force members in implementation has been variable out in the local jurisdictions. A way to strengthen their involvement across the board is give them the ability to more easily participate. If applicable, each federal agency should have the authority to consider coral reef impacts in their decision making, and Florida recommends that each federal agency member of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force have a dedicated amount in their budget to help implement the Local Action Strategies. Not just NOAA and Department of Interior but all federal agencies must be actively and meaningfully involved if we are to conserve coral reefs for the future.

Great strides have been made by Florida, by the other states, territories and commonwealths, and by the Coral Reef Task Force in the last few years. I would especially like to compliment the efforts and leadership of the All Islands Committee. Even though their Congressional voting clout is small, by banding together and pursuing their shared priorities, they have lead the nation in coral reef conservation. I strongly recommend we as a nation listen to what they have to say because they are the ones who are working every single day on the front lines of coral reef protection.

As you can see, much has been accomplished, but more needs to be done. Much more.

Coral reefs are some of the most remarkable habitats on the planet. My favorite fact about coral reefs is that even though they make up about only one tenth of one percent of the ocean floor they provide habitat for over 25% of the marine species. They are stunning in their beauty and biodiversity and we are losing them at an alarming rate.

The word "crisis" gets thrown around a lot, especially in the environmental arena. But I truly believe we are very near or currently in a crisis stage for coral reefs in Florida, in the United States and around the globe. In the last eight years, the coral cover in the Florida Keys has declined 37%, which mirrors a trend seen throughout the Caribbean region.

Over 20 years ago, I did my SCUBA certification dive down at Looe Key in the Florida Keys. I can still remember being blown away by the diversity and colors, seeing barracuda skulking by, hearing the parrot fish gnawing on the reefs, and watching the curious small fish which had come to investigate these ungainly, four-limbed creatures hovering in their world. A few years ago, I returned to Looe Key and was greatly saddened to see that the world of incredible color had been reduced to mostly shades of grey. Some barracuda still skulked by and some parrot fish still gnawed on the reef but something beyond measure had most certainly been lost. It is my goal to retrieve that world of color and wonder so young divers in the future can go experience what I had the chance to see.

To make that happen, we must literally redouble our efforts to protect and conserve our nation's coral reefs. We should continue to support ecosystem-based management as seen in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary; we must stop relying solely on NOAA and give all federal agencies the necessary legal tools and funding to help implement coral reef conservation; we must fund the full implementation of the states, territories and commonwealths Local Action Strategies; and we should listen to the advice of the All Islands Committee because they know whereof they speak. The coral reefs of the United States are a national and international treasure and all of us have a responsibility to ensure that they are here for future generations to enjoy.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak to you today.