

# **Palm Beach County Reef Rescue**



# Reef Rescue

an all volunteer, grassroots, nonprofit, 501(c)3 organization.

Formed by a group of recreational divers to address a lack of effective resource management at the local level.

Our ranks now spread worldwide and include divers and non-divers alike concerned with protecting the threatened coastal ecosystem of south Florida.

# Florida's coral reef system

3<sup>rd</sup> longest in the world



Over 6,000 years old

## Southeast Florida Coral Reefs



The reef resources which lie within a four-county area from the northern boundary of Biscayne National Park in Miami-Dade County to the St. Lucie Inlet in Martin County annually sustain more than 71,000 jobs and generates \$6.3 billion dollars in sales and income for Florida.

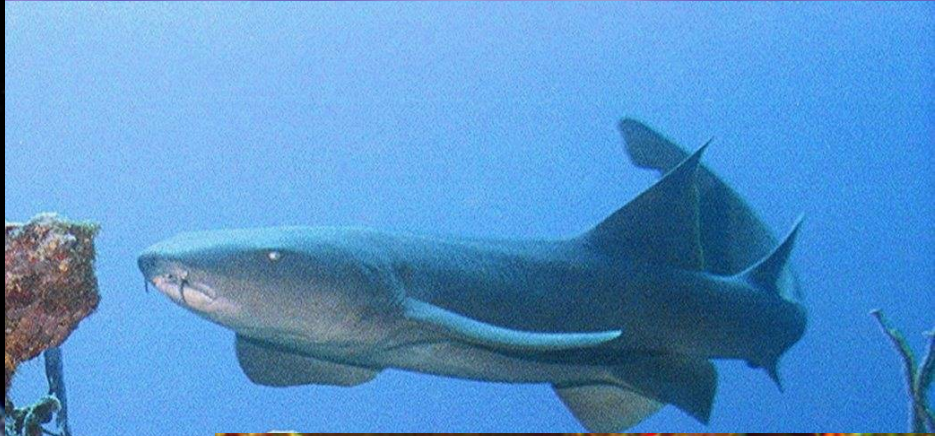
Source: FDEP February 2009

The reefs from Key Biscayne to Martin County are outside management zone...



home to threatened and endangered species

# PBC some of the last healthy reefs in Florida



Palm Beach County top US scuba diving tourism destination

# Staghorn & Elkhorn the major reef building corals of the Caribbean



# Staghorn Coral



**97% of Florida's staghorn and elkhorn corals have died in the last 25 years.**

Photo: October 2009, Bath & Tennis Reef, Palm Beach, FL

# Listing history:

- May 2006 elkhorn and staghorn (*Acropora*) corals are added to the Endangered Species List as threatened. NOAA/NMFS determines the species are likely to become in danger of extinction in the foreseeable future.
- February 2008 NOAA/NMFS proposes designating Florida waters from the shoreline to 90 ft. deep, from Dry Tortugas to Palm Beach/Martin county line as Critical Habitat (CH) necessary for the conservation of the species.

# Critical Habitat

is the area occupied by the species at the time of listing, which contains features essential to the survival of the species.

The designated area becomes a management zone for efforts focused on species recovery.

- During the public comment period the Town of Palm Beach argues to NOAA/NMFS that none of Palm Beach County should be included since staghorn coral colonies in PBC are not significant, the reef structure in PBC is not suitable habitat and the Critical Habitat Designation will result in increased cost of compliance for beach renourishment projects.
- November 2008 NOAA/NMFS issues final Critical Habitat Designation dropping more than half of PBC and moves northern boundary south to Boynton Beach Inlet, excluding the reefs offshore of the Town of Palm Beach.

- December 2008 Reef Rescue files formal petition with federal government to revise CH by moving northern boundary to Palm Beach Inlet. RR provides documentation the reefs offshore off the Town of Palm Beach contain the features essential for the survival of the species as described by NMFS and documents the presence of staghorn coral on PBC reefs north of the Boynton Beach Inlet and offshore of the Town of Palm Beach.
- July 2009 NOAA/NMFS finds "... the Reef Rescue petition presents substantial scientific information that the critical habitat designation revision may be warranted." NOAA/NMFS invites public comment until August 26, 2009.



During the public comment period FDEP and PBCDERM send comments supporting moving the CH boundary north to the Palm Beach Inlet.

The City of Lake Worth issued a proclamation supporting the Reef Rescue petition.

# The Town of Palm Beach reiterates their objections...



## TOWN OF PALM BEACH

Public Works Department

August 26, 2009

RIN 0648-XP68

Ms. Jennifer Moore  
National Marine Fisheries Service  
Southeast Regional Office  
Protected Resources Division  
263 13th Avenue South  
St. Petersburg, Florida 33701

Dear Ms. Moore:

We are providing the following comments related to your July 27, 2009 notice in the Federal Register (74 FR No 142, pages 36995 and 36996) regarding the January 6, 2009, petition from Palm Beach County Reef Rescue (the Petitioner) to revise elkhorn and staghorn corals' critical habitat (PBCRR, 2009).

The Town of Palm Beach provided comments to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) regarding the designation of critical habitat for these species on May 5, 2008, copy attached (we would be pleased to provide the attachments to that letter upon request). We believe that those comments remain relevant to the NMFS current 90 day finding for the petition to revise the critical habitat designation for *Acropora palmata* and *Acropora cervicornis* (Petition).

We believe that the NMFS did a comprehensive, deliberate and thoughtful job listing critical habitat for these species of *Acropora* published as a final rule in the Federal Register on November 26, 2008. As stated in your notice on this Petition, critical habitat is designated under the Endangered Species Act (ESA):

*"(i) the specific areas within the geographical area currently occupied by the species, at the time it is listed...on which are found those physical or biological features (I) essential to the conservation of the species and (II) which may require special management considerations or protection; and (ii) specific areas outside the geographical area occupied by the species at the time it is listed upon a determination by the Secretary that such areas are essential for the conservation of the species."*

The NMFS final rule published on November 26, 2008 (Final Rule) provided for clear and concise Primary Constituent Elements (PCE) for the two species as:

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full authority under the Section 7 provisions of the ESA to protect those colonies through informal or formal consultation with the action agency.

Extension of the critical habitat further north is not warranted based on the known current and historic distribution of *A. cervicornis*. Such an extension of the critical habitat is also not necessary to avoid jeopardizing the species. Based on the above, we strongly recommend that the NMFS maintain the geographic reach of the critical habitat that was established in the final rule on November 26, 2008.

Sincerely,

H. Paul Brazil, P.E.  
Director of Public Works

Enclosures: May 5, 2008 Letter from Greenberg Traurig  
May 6, 2008 Letter from Greenberg Traurig

Cc: Peter B. Elwell, Town Manager

## Reef Rescue: We found rare Staghorn coral where Palm Beach officials told feds it wouldn't be

By SONJA ISGER and ANDREW MARRA

Palm Beach Post Staff Writers

Thursday, October 01, 2009

RIVIERA BEACH — Excitement is brewing this morning about a patch of life no one knew was flourishing in waters a mile east of the island of Palm Beach.

Scuba divers for the non-profit group Palm Beach County Reef Rescue announced they have stumbled across a previously undiscovered field of rare Staghorn coral - a species on the Endangered Species List since 2006.

"We've found the largest field (of the coral) in the county," Reef Rescue's director Ed Tichenor said. "We're really surprised by this."

The find is significant, Reef Rescue contends, because it comes as Palm Beach town officials object to federal habitat protection for the area, where only small pockets of the endangered coral had been found previously. Town officials contend that this protected coral is uncommon in Palm Beach's waters.

Town officials did not return phone calls seeking comment this morning.

Reef Rescue and other environmentalists hope that the discovery of the coral will convince the National Marine Fisheries Service to extend its protective area north to Palm Beach.

The federal agency last year had designated about 1,300 square miles of ocean floor as critical habitat for the corals, ranging from the Florida Keys north to the Boynton Beach Inlet.

But Palm Beach County Reef Rescue has petitioned the government to extend it to the

Lake Worth Inlet, including the town of Palm Beach's coastline.

Staghorn coral was declared a threatened species in 2006. It naturally is found throughout the Florida Keys, the Bahamas, the Caribbean islands and Venezuela.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration notes that disease and damage from humans and hurricanes has wiped out up to 98 percent of the Staghorn population since 1980.

At one time, scientists believed that the Staghorn population stretched no further north than Boca Raton's waters, but over the last several years it has been found throughout the waters off Palm Beach County, Tichenor said this morning.

The divers who found this field Saturday were looking for Staghorn coral but never thought it would be so abundant.

They estimate the field is between 100 and 300 feet long.

"I was expecting to see it but not as much," said Connie Gasque, a Palm Beach resident who led the dive group. "My reaction was 'Wow! Everywhere you looked, there it was.'"

## Reef Rescue floods Palm Beach officials with emails pushing coral protection zone

By WILLIAM KELLY  
Daily News Staff Writer

Sunday, October 04, 2009

Palm Beach County Reef Rescue formed in 2003 after a group of scuba divers and environmentalists rallied to force the City of Delray Beach to close a sewage pipe that was spewing partially treated outflow into the ocean.

The divers had noticed algae blooms sprouting on a coral reef near the pipe outfall, and contended it was killing the reef.

Reef Rescue's campaign of opposition — including "Surf the Sewer" T-shirts the nonprofit group sold to Delray residents — yielded results. The city agreed in 2006 to close the pipe, and did so April 1.

"The reason they did was our email campaign, and public relations campaign, to let everyone know what they were doing," Reef Rescue Director Ed Tichenor said Friday. "It was not unlike what we're doing today with the Town of Palm Beach."

In less than two weeks, Reef Rescue has flooded Town Hall with 400 emails calling on the town to drop its opposition to federal habitat protection for staghorn coral found off the town's coast. Many of the emails were from out-of-town scuba divers who signed on to a form letter Reef Rescue provided on its Web site.

"We have an email list of several thousand people and we ask other groups to forward it," Tichenor said. "The scuba diving network is worldwide, and Palm Beach County is a top diving destination."

The group stepped up pressure last week with a press conference and dive trip publicizing its discovery of a reported 80-foot-by-30-foot patch

of the coral in waters about a mile offshore from the Bath & Tennis Club.

Reef Rescue says the find proves the staghorn coral can thrive in local waters. Staghorn coral has been protected by the federal Endangered Species Act since 2006.

Reef Rescue has petitioned the National Marine Fisheries Service to extend the northern boundary of a critical habitat zone for the coral from the Boynton Inlet 15 miles north to the Palm Beach Inlet.

The fisheries service has said it will announce its decision Jan. 6.

The subject has raised questions about how a protected zone might affect the town's plans to continue to dredge offshore sand and periodically rebuild its eroded beaches.

Town officials have been reluctant to discuss their opposition in that context, but haven't denied that it is a concern. Coastal Systems International, a town consultant, has said the habitat designation would lengthen environmental reviews for beach fills without adding substantial protection for the coral.

Before Reef Rescue announced its discovery of a staghorn coral field, the town had argued there wasn't enough of the coral to justify the habitat protection. The town has now asked Reef Rescue for the dive coordinates so it can inspect the coral patch itself.

How can you help?





Visit [www.reef-rescue.org](http://www.reef-rescue.org)

Click on TAKE ACTION:

to view Action Alert page where you can send an email to The Town of Palm Beach requesting they withdraw their objection to federal coral habitat protection.