



Worldwide Office
4245 North Fairfax Drive
Suite 100
Arlington, Virginia 22203

tel (703) 841-5300
fax (703) 841-7400

nature.org

**Public Comment to the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy
by Erika Feller, The Nature Conservancy
April 3, 2003**

Admiral Watkins and members of the Commission, on behalf of The Nature Conservancy, thank you for the opportunity to provide comment. While there are many aspects of the Ocean Commission's work that is of interest to us, my comments today will be limited to the Commission's recommendations on Coral Reefs, a marine system with extraordinary biodiversity and human values.

The Nature Conservancy is very involved in coral reef conservation both in the United States and internationally. Recognizing the significance of these and other tropical marine systems, we have pledged to work with Conservation International and World Wildlife Fund to promote partnerships with a wide range of other organizations – to protect tropical marine biodiversity around the world. Key components of our efforts are to help:

- greatly expand the area of coral reefs and associated habitats under protection,
- eliminate threats to the biological integrity of these areas posed by unsustainable fishing, pollution, coastal development, and other factors, and
- improve the management effectiveness of marine protected areas.

As a complement to these important actions, our collective work will also seek to build *resilience* in the face of chronic, large-scale threats such as climate change into MPA selection, design, and management. Our initial focus is on identifying areas within reefs that are naturally resistant to bleaching, and spawning aggregation sites for important reef fishes. These can serve as essential “sources” for replenishing areas damaged by large-scale threats. By linking these source areas through a better understanding of currents, larval dispersal and recruitment – in other words, *connectivity* within and among reefs – we hope to catalyze the creation of representative, *mutually-replenishing networks* of MPAs that enhance the recovery prospects of the component reserves and broader coral reef and associated ecosystems.

The Conservancy urges that in addition to the draft recommendations already “on the table” to enhance the scope of U.S. international leadership activities for coral reef management and conservation the Commission report:

- A. recognize the impacts of climate change on coral reefs;
- B. recommend the need to manage for that Change through support for targeted research on the attributes of coral reef systems and marine protected area networks that make them resilient;
- C. and support for the development of a global network of protected, mutually replenishing, resilient coral reef areas.

Specifically,

- We encourage the Commission to include in its recommendations research to better understand resilience of corals to bleaching, explicitly identify areas that are naturally resistant to coral bleaching, incorporate them into protected areas, and take active part in global monitoring efforts on resilience to bleaching.
- We encourage the Commission to include the identification and protection of spawning aggregation sites for important reef fishes within the scope of protected areas.
- We encourage the Commission to direct increased attention to better understand connectivity, larval dispersal, and recruitment within and among coral reefs, and to incorporate this information into the design or redesign of representative, resilient MPA networks.

We see excellent opportunities for this work to contribute to coral reef conservation actions in Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia, as well as other places.

On the subject of International Management of Living Marine Resources, we encourage the Commission to expand the recommendations on global leadership in order to have a significant impact on coral reef management in the countries where most coral reefs are found. In addition to research, the Commission should encourage US leadership and support for a wider range of activities including development and implementation of MPA networks, Integrated Coastal Management programs to provide a supportive governance context for coral reef conservation, capacity building of individuals and institutions that can contribute to coral reef conservation, and learning networks among management practitioners on priority conservation topics.

We urge the Commission to include in its recommendations the need to build upon and expand the multifaceted coral reef research, management, and capacity-building programs that are currently implemented through the NOAA's National Ocean Service, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Department of State, as well as the US engagement in and support of the International Coral Reef Initiative.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.