

## SIERRA CLUB COMMENTS FOR THE U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE – 2/25/2009

Task Force Chairs, members, and fellow participants: my name is Judith Lang, presenting comments on behalf of the Sierra Club.

Today, a month after the inauguration of Barack Obama, we might recall the sober tone of the President's address. He recited many challenges facing us today, including the need to "roll back the specter of a warming planet." We might also recall his statement that "...we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task." Anyone who has been following the work of the Task Force knows full well we are engaged in a difficult task, and that there are those among us who have been giving their all to the task of meeting the challenges facing coral reefs worldwide.

The good news is that already there are some signs that help, as well as hope, is on its way. Among those signs is the appointment of a distinguished marine biologist and past president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Dr. Jane Lubchenco, to head NOAA. Her experience and expertise will be invaluable in guiding NOAA to addressing major threats to coral reef ecosystems the Task Force has identified, including the need to minimize the impacts of overfishing, research the links between coral bleaching and disease, and implement more effective systems of marine governance. Moreover, the Justice Department deserves credit for its recent lawsuits against two Miami-based seafood brokers who were importing undersized spiny lobsters (*Panulirus argus*) from Brazil and The Bahamas. We also commend the EPA for its recent decision, urged and supported by the Sierra Club's Hawai'i Chapter, to require that the wastewater treatment plants of Honouliuli and Sand Island in Honolulu upgrade to full secondary treatment for the effluent discharged through ocean outfalls.

Another welcome sign is the Obama administration's recognition that the threats of global climate change are real, and the United States has both the responsibility and the opportunity to take a leadership role in global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Sierra Club has long urged the Task Force to take a leadership role, especially at the federal level, to address the causes of global warming as well as its impacts, as have also Governor Tulafono of American Samoa and the All Islands Committee. At the August, 2008 meeting in Kona, Hawai'i the Task Force finally acknowledged that "**Urgent action is needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.**" We are grateful that this imperative is now supported at the highest levels of government. Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and promotion of clean, renewable energy are also high priority campaigns for the Sierra Club and its 1.3 million members and supporters.

Be advised that we have enhanced expectations for the Task Force as we enter the year 2009. We also know it is crucial that Congress and the incoming administration both (a) recognize the immense potential - as yet largely unrealized - in the Task Force and its partners to help sustain reef-related ecosystem services, and (b) continue to provide the resources necessary for your work. This is especially true as the President has pledged to review all federal programs to determine their effectiveness, and as there is stress on the need to invest in the country's infrastructure. Infrastructure must include more than bridges, highways, mass transit systems and bicycle lanes. We must ensure that natural resources, and coral reef ecosystems in particular, are also key components of this country's, and the world's, infrastructure deserving protection and restoration. Thus the Sierra Club will be joining with other NGO partners to urge re-authorization, and adequate funding, of the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000 and other legislative initiatives relating to the marine environment. We are pleased that H.R. 860, the Coral Reef Conservation Act Reauthorization and Enhancement Amendments of 2009, has been introduced in the House of Representatives.

H.R.860 contains amendments promoting activities designed to minimize the likelihood of vessel impacts on coral reefs, including promotion of ecologically sound navigation near coral reefs, and authorizing emergency response actions necessary to minimize the destruction of or injury to a coral reef, or loss of an ecosystem function of a coral reef, from vessel impacts. The February 5 grounding of the guided missile cruiser USS Port Royal, which caused major damage to a coral reef near the Honolulu International Airport, provided a stark reminder of the need for these provisions. There was an obvious failure in navigation; initial assessments erroneously stated that the grounding area consisted of sand and rock, rather than coral reef resources requiring emergency response actions; and the Navy delayed notifying the State Department of Health of an emergency discharge of 7,000 gallons of wastewater.

**Clearly there are lessons to be learned from all this. We request that the Task Force host a full discussion of this incident at its meeting in Puerto Rico, including reports by relevant agencies on the extent of damage to the coral reef, recommendations for improving preventive and emergency response measures, and the nature and amount of liability for costs and damages to the coral reef.** (See attached news article).

Two major outbreaks of disease that followed mass bleaching events have impacted large areas of the wider Caribbean within the last decade (Mesoamerica and The Bahamas being primarily affected in 1998, and the eastern regions, including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands where over half the live coral cover died on some reefs, in 2005). The devastating impacts of these acute, climate-change related mortality events overlie such a multitude of on-going natural and anthropogenic stressors that my colleagues and I are frequently asked: "Can our corals and reef can recover?" I can only think to say that we all share responsibility for today's ecological meltdowns. Therefore we must all try harder at our respective local levels to do everything possible to reduce all forms of local and regional pollution, overdevelopment, overharvesting and overconsumption, even as we all try harder, at all levels up to the global, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Responsible, creative actions are needed in 2009, from each of us as individuals, some of us as members of NGOs like the Sierra Club, and within each of the territorial, state and federal agencies that you respectively represent.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our comments.

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Excerpts from a Honolulu Star-Bulletin article regarding the grounding of the U.S.S. Port Royal:

## **Extensive coral reef damage revealed in ship's grounding**

**The Navy had previously said that the site consisted only of sand and rocks**

By Gregg K. Kakesako POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Feb 20, 2009

State and Navy divers have determined that the \$1 billion warship USS Port Royal damaged a coral reef when it ran aground half a mile south of the Honolulu Airport's reef runway earlier this month. "Although initial reports indicated that the ship had grounded on a rock and sand bottom, our subsequent surveys have shown that there is in fact coral reef," said Department of Land and Natural Resources Director Laura Thielen in a joint news release with the Navy. "Divers from our Division of Aquatic Resources are now working in cooperation with counterparts from the Navy to ensure that no further damage occurs, and to map the full extent of the grounding scar."

The Navy also faces the possibility of hefty fines since coral is protected by state and federal laws. Deborah Ward, DLNR spokeswoman, said it is "premature" to talk about fines until the joint state-Navy investigation is completed and reviewed by state attorneys. Last year, DLNR fined a Maui tour boat company \$550,000 for damaging coral in the waters of Molokini islet.

In addition, the Navy says now that 7,000 — not 5,000 — gallons of waste water were dumped while the ship was aground Feb. 5-9 to prevent it from backing up and endangering the crew.

State and Navy divers will spend another week moving debris from the grounding area to deeper water and reattaching large pieces of coral.

The Navy had originally failed to tell the state and public about the waste-water discharge, even though two Health Department officials attended a meeting with Navy officials at Pearl Harbor on Feb. 8.

The Navy said the waste water consisted mostly of sea water, used to flush waste.

"Keep in mind that while the ship was aground for those 78 hours, the Navy was concerned foremost about the safety of the crew, freeing the ship and minimizing damage to the environment," said Rear Adm. Joseph Walsh, deputy commander of the Pacific Fleet. "We regret this unintentional grounding, and we are glad that we were able to refloat the ship without injury to the crew while minimizing environmental harm."

Find the complete article at:

[http://www.starbulletin.com/news/hawaii/news/20090220\\_Extensive\\_coral\\_reef\\_damage\\_revealed\\_in\\_ships\\_grounding.html](http://www.starbulletin.com/news/hawaii/news/20090220_Extensive_coral_reef_damage_revealed_in_ships_grounding.html)