

Joint NOAA-Puerto Rico Announcement

Summary

1. With support from NOAA, Puerto Rico will implement a strategy to strengthen enforcement of its existing regulations by improving public awareness, providing further training and support for rangers, and addressing other critical constraints to enforcement.
2. With support from NOAA, Puerto Rico will advance coral reef management in exceptional places, by strengthening reserves in Culebra, Cabo Rojo, Parguera, Desecheo Island Marine Reserve and Vieques, and by establishing over the next 2 years a natural reserve in Rincón and a no take zone at Isla Cabrita in Ceiba, in collaboration with the U.S. Naval base.
3. The Department of Natural and Environmental Resources' Marine Recreational Fishing Project will continue to work in collaboration with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), to document aspects related to the recreational marine fishery and determine the economic value of that activity in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico will use the results of this assessment to better incorporate recreational fishing on coral reefs into its management, regulations and enforcement.
4. Puerto Rico will work over the next year to identify the much needed coral reef fisheries regulation. To achieve this, the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources will establish a task force with representation of state and federal agencies and NGOs
5. With support from NOAA, Puerto Rico will reconvene its interagency coral reef advisory committee, created by Puerto Rican Law 147 (Coral Reef Conservation Act of 1999), to establish a Strategic Management Plan for Puerto Rico's Coral Reefs outlining how to address these threats over the next five years. Through public hearings, consultations with experts, and review of existing work, the advisory committee will provide a report to the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources's Secretary with recommendations to the Governor within 1 year on key steps that can be taken.

Announcement Presented by Honorable Salvador Salas, Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

Good morning, distinguished members of the Coral Reef Task Force, Government officials from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and other invited guests. It is an honor to welcome all of you to our Island. The United States of America recognized the importance of and the need to conserve coral reefs under Executive Order 13089 which designated protection and awareness of coral reefs by all appropriate federal agencies. I have a personal commitment to protect, conserve and restore our natural resources, and share with you the common interest in the conservation of one of our most precious natural resources, the forests of the sea...Our Coral Reefs.

The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico acknowledges the valuable and consistent contributions of the All Islands Committee to the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force. This Committee was instrumental in the formulation of the public policy with respect to coral reef conservation, and thus, in the creation of the Executive Order 13089 and the Task Force. We are proud to be members of the All Islands Committee.

In response to our commitment and in the spirit of collaboration between local and federal partners, The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and NOAA have agreed to collaborate in a series of actions.

Strengthen DNER's Law Enforcement Rangers

Through its laws and policies, The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico has made commitments to protecting coral reefs from a variety of threats. For example, Puerto Rico was the fourth coastal jurisdiction, and the first island, to have an approved plan for coastal non-point pollution. Additionally, Puerto Rico manages its commercially important fish and shellfish species, such as Queen Conch, Red Hind and Spiny Lobster by maintaining seasonal closures.

Puerto Rico realizes that the social and economic benefits of healthy coral reefs, requires active enforcement of these existing regulations. Currently, Puerto Rico's enforcement rangers work with great dedication to implement these important measures. However, they have not always had the technical and financial support they needed from the people they are trying to serve. Puerto Rico recognizes the essential need for strong enforcement. With support from NOAA, Puerto Rico will implement a strategy to strengthen enforcement of its existing regulations by improving public awareness, providing further training and support for rangers, and addressing other critical constraints to enforcement.

Puerto Rico's Coral Reefs as Natural Reserves

Puerto Rico has designated a series of natural reserves, and no take zones, to protect important coastal and marine resources. As an example, through Public Law no. 57 of March 10, 2000, the Puerto Rico Legislature, designated about 0.8 km (about 0.5 miles) of coastal waters and ecosystems surrounding Desecheo Island as the Desecheo Marine Reserve. Desecheo coastal waters, the second no-take zone area in Puerto Rico, harbor some of the best developed and healthiest coral reefs in Puerto Rico. Similarly, through Joint Resolution 307 of July 12, 2000 ordered the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources to identify and designate within 3 years, at least 3% of the insular platform of Puerto Rico and adjacent Islands the management mechanism that it requires.

Puerto Rico would like to build on the successes of its reserves by further strengthening its protected system. With support from NOAA, Puerto Rico will advance coral reef management in exceptional places, by strengthening reserves in Culebra, Cabo Rojo, Parguera, Desecheo Island Marine Reserve and Vieques, and by establishing over the next 2 years a natural reserve in Rincón and a no take zone at Isla Cabrita in Ceiba, in collaboration with the U.S. Naval base.

Puerto Rico's Coral Reef Recreational Fisheries

Interest and participation in marine recreational fishing has grown dramatically in recent years, without being adequately assessed. Until recently, Puerto Rico only collected information on the commercial component of the marine fishery. Since January 2000, the DNER, in collaboration with the National Marine Fisheries Services (NMFS), started an islandwide project to collect data on marine recreational fishing. Results obtained

showed there are approximately 200,000 local marine recreational anglers and dozens of thousands of visiting anglers that fish in our waters from shore, private boats and charters annually.

The Department of Natural and Environmental Resources' Marine Recreational Fishing Project will continue to work in collaboration with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), to document aspects related to the recreational marine fishery and determine the economic value of that activity in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico will use the results of this assessment to better incorporate recreational fishing on coral reefs into its management, regulations and enforcement.

Puerto Rico's Coral Reef Fisheries Regulations

Fisheries are an essential element of Puerto Rico's economic and social character. There is a need to manage these for the long-term benefit of the Puerto Rican people. This management has been a challenge for the past decade, however, inaction will only result in long-term losses for all parties involved. Fisheries data have already shown declines in coral reef fish size and abundance as well as increases in the effort it takes fishers to maintain the same level of catch.

Puerto Rico will work over the next year to identify the much needed coral reef fisheries regulation. To achieve this, the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources will establish a task force with representation of state and federal agencies and NGOs one year from today.

Strategic Management Plan for Puerto Rico's Coral Reefs

Puerto Rico has identified several issues as posing immediate, high threats to the territory's coral reefs, including, over fishing, sedimentation and non-point pollution, coral bleaching and diseases, development pressure and unmanaged recreational activities and tourism. Puerto Rico recognizes the need to establish strategies to address these key threats in consultation with stakeholders from government, universities, private industry, and the public. With support from NOAA, Puerto Rico will reconvene its interagency coral reef advisory committee, created by Puerto Rican Law 147 (Coral Reef Conservation Act of 1999), to establish a Strategic Management Plan for Puerto Rico's Coral Reefs outlining how to address these threats over the next five years. Through public hearings, consultations with experts, and review of existing work, the advisory committee will provide a report to the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources's Secretary with recommendations to the Governor within 1 year on key steps that can be taken.

We have a real challenge for the future...to halt coral reef degradation. I ask you, as members of the Coral Reef Task Force, the Federal Government, our local Government, and those that derive income, pleasure and other benefits from coral reefs, to face the challenge and do your very best to restore the health of our reefs. As my contribution, I will oversee that our agencies work in close collaboration with Federal agencies, the academy, stakeholders and interested parties to ensure that we all commit to actions that reduce adverse impacts on coral reefs.

Thank you very much for sharing with us your ideas, your enthusiasm and your devoted dedication to restore coral reefs health and our quality of life.