



NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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October 19, 1998

BABBITT EXPLAINS INTERIOR'S COMMITMENT TO CORAL REEF PROTECTION

Biscayne, FL -- Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt today discussed serious and global threats to coral reefs, proposing a number of steps the Department of the Interior would undertake in response to President Clinton's June, 1998, Executive Order to federal agencies.

Babbitt's announcement came as he and Robert Mallett, Deputy Secretary of the Commerce Department, co-chaired the first meeting of the Presidentially-created U.S. Coral Reef Task Force. The session was held near coral reefs at Biscayne National Park in Florida. President Clinton's Executive Order 13089 established the Task Force in a government-wide effort to protect and restore coral reefs in U.S., commonwealth and territorial waters and to work in partnership with other nations to conserve and protect coral reefs worldwide.

"The President's Executive Order establishes fundamental and far-reaching protections for what we are coming to see as the underwater Yellowstone's and the Yosemite's of the sea," Babbitt said. "It is important that we develop common approaches and goals for research, monitoring and conservation of these vital areas before coral reefs, that have been around more than two hundred million years, succumb in a few decades to a variety of human and environmental pressures."

Coral reefs under immediate consideration include those around the Florida Keys, and extensive formations around many other U.S. islands, including, primarily, those in the extended Hawaiian chain, and around Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands.

Coral reefs exist only in tropical and semi-tropical waters, and are constructed very slowly by tiny living creatures that secrete rocklike structures around themselves; gradually building up fragile fringing reef systems that provide an environment that nourishes many forms of marine life.

Specific threats to coral reefs are many, including over-fishing of reefs near highly-populated areas; destructive harvesting practices, such as the use of poison and explosives to stun fish to be captured alive (killing many others); badly-managed forestry, farming and construction practices that create large quantities of silt and sediment that wash out to sea and onto the reefs; pollution of water quality by sewage and other environmental contaminants; global temperature rise; and the breaking off of live coral and targeting of reef species for hobbyists' tanks.

"Too much civilization, accompanied by too little education, is creating havoc with these beautiful under-water habitats. It is high time that federal and public efforts converge to protect these fragile environments," the Secretary told the Task Force.

As part of a broad program to protect America's endangered coral reefs, Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt announced today a series of reef management grants to four jurisdictions: the State of Hawaii, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the Territories of Guam and American Samoa.

The four grants were made by the technical assistance program of Interior's Office of Insular Affairs (OIA). All are designed to further existing coral reef protection programs in the four jurisdictions. Moneys from both OIA and from the Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration were used for this purpose.

In American Samoa, the \$48,500 grant will support a project to monitor and evaluate the impact of coastal development on the reefs. The grant was made to the Governor's Office.

Guam's \$40,000 grant will be used by the Coastal Management Program and the Bureau of Planning to support scientific research projects and public education programs on how individuals and businesses can work to prevent further reef deterioration.

Both the Puerto Rican and the Hawaiian programs have been channeled through Honolulu's Pacific Basin Development Council. The \$80,805 grant will be divided between the two jurisdictions, and used to advance ongoing coral reef management and protection programs.

Secretary Babbitt also directed the National Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service to review and appropriately revise, no later than FY 2002, plans for the management of the 9 national parks and 17 national wildlife refuges containing coral reefs to assure that those coral reef ecosystems are adequately protected.

The National Park Service and EPA, in cooperation with NOAA, will expand the EPA Water Quality Monitoring Program to cover Biscayne and the Dry Tortugas National Parks. The National Park Service has committed \$25,000 for the expansion.

The Department of the Interior, in cooperation with NOAA, will develop plans and implement actions to protect coral reef ecosystems in the Dry Tortugas National Park and the surrounding area of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. The Park will undertake a parallel and coordinated process with the Sanctuary for assessment, planning and management that will include involvement from all interested stakeholders. The Park will commit the resources needed to do this effectively, and will consider all actions needed to protect coral reef ecosystems.

Secretary Babbitt expressed serious concern for the frequency of boat groundings at Biscayne National Park and proposed to the Coral Reef Task Force the establishment of a special interagency working group to address and recommend solutions for the problem. Babbitt explained that reported groundings reached about 170 in 1997 alone.

The Department of the Interior will coordinate with other members of the Coral Reef Task Force to develop a coral reef protection web page at <http://coralreef.gov>. The new web page will present information to anyone interested in coral reef ecosystems, and provide access to projects undertaken by federal agencies on the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force in research, monitoring and conservation of these vital "rain forests of the sea." Department of the Interior materials prepared for the Task Force meeting are also available on the web at <http://www.usgs.gov/coralreef/>.

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