

19th U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE MEETING
Report of the
U.S. All Islands Coral Reef Committee
February 27, 2008

Hafa adai, Talofa, Aloha, and Hola, and hello,

It is my great pleasure, on behalf of the U.S. All Islands Coral Reef Committee (AIC) to present this report on our activities and accomplishments since we last met in American Samoa in August 2008.

As we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force (USCRTF), the AIC is taking this opportunity to reflect on our accomplishments since its establishment in 1994 by the Governors of our jurisdictions. In the fourteen years since then, a number of key initiatives have been implemented including Presidential Executive Order #13089 which established the USCRTF in 1998 "to preserve and protect the biodiversity, health, heritage, and social and economic value of U.S. coral reef ecosystems". In 2000, the USCRTF adopted the National Action Plan to conserve coral reefs which has served as a long-term plan and provides the guiding framework for the priorities, strategies, and implementation plans of the USCRTF and its members.

The AIC acknowledges the strong partnerships we have established with our partners NOAA, DOI, and other federal agencies since 1998. For more information on the Committee's activities and achievements, please go to our website: www.allislandscorals.org. Over the next 10 years, we look forward to more support from our federal partners to assist us in managing and conserving our coral reef ecosystems.

We also recognize the effort of community groups, scientists, and NGOs for their on-going support of this very important partnership of the states, territories, commonwealths, freely associated states and federal agencies.

These partnerships and initiatives at the local level have resulted in significant accomplishments, through the sharing of resources, expertise and programs. However, we have just begun to make progress and there is still much more to be done.

What is working well for jurisdictions in the USCRTF?

Since the establishment of the USCRTF, the AIC is pleased to report that we have made good progress in the following areas:

Improved coordination and policies

- strong support and participation from our governors in the USCRTF

- Funding and support for Local Action Strategies – see LAS resolution
- Improved communication, coordination and strategic planning amongst the AIC members since the establishment of the AIC Secretariat

Improved communication and partnerships

- Improved communication with federal agencies -- a key outcome is the development of professional relationships and the knowledge of who to contact in the federal agencies, both on the ground locally and in DC to address issues of concern.
- In some jurisdictions, strong partnerships have developed between the local agencies and their federal partners to develop and implement the LAS;
- Of particular note, NOAA has played a key role in the jurisdiction's efforts to sustainably manage and protect coral reef resources. Comparable contributions and commitments by all members of the USCRTF would allow for a much more sustained and far reaching effective strategy in our overall efforts to protect coral reefs.
- The LAS projects provided opportunities community and stakeholder involvement in the Laolao Bay and Talakhaya Watersheds in the CNMI
- The community-based MPA initiative included participation by villages throughout American Samoa.
- In Guam, the business community was engaged as a full partner in implementing the IYOR campaign.

Improved access to new tools and products

- Access to proven tools, such as buoys and navigational aids, for marking sensitive coral reef and hard bottom areas, and to provide moorings for vessels near sensitive habitats and minimize human impacts on coral and seagrass communities.
- Management tools, such as those developed in the Jobos Bay Reserve in Puerto Rico have served as a model for implementation in other reserves
- New Best Management Practices such as BMP's for Construction, dredge and Fill and Other Activities Adjacent to Coral Reefs developed in Florida
- We have gathered a critical knowledge base on the status and trends of resources through long-term monitoring of the coral reef communities, as well as a characterization of areas where little data was available.
- Understanding the extent and condition of our resources is the foundation upon which we can shift to implementation and adaptive management in response to what we've learned.
- Coral nurseries, for the growth of threatened staghorn coral, and as a temporary holding area for corals removed from permitted construction areas where otherwise they would be destroyed.

- In Hawaii the development of the guidebook for marine and coastal managers has provided a coordinated approach to involving communities in marine stewardship programs.
- Several years of scientific monitoring of nearshore reefs and lagoons allowed the CNMI to document statistically sound trends and ecological measures (criteria) to assess status of reef health and link scientific trends to management strategies and policies

Education and Outreach

- Targeted educational programs, such as Team Ocean in the Florida Keys where staff are on the water at reef sites, looking to assist and inform boaters that may approach areas where they could damage resources.
- The Coral Reef Outreach Network (CRON) in Hawaii continues to involve over 30 outreach providers statewide in coordinated outreach events for Hawaii's Living Reef Program and the numerous efforts now underway for IYOR.
- Coral Fellowship Program - the USVI has benefited significantly from the Coral Fellowship Program which has enabled us to network much more effectively with a number of local and federal agencies to strengthen partnerships, such as the Virgin Islands Network of Educators, and advance our mutual outreach goals
- Effective Inter-agency coordination, through various working groups such as the Local Action Strategy Network, and the St. Croix East End Marine Park Advisory Committee, continues to be effective in maximizing the use of limited resources in our efforts to establish MPAs.
- Student internships introduced CNMI post-secondary students to natural resource careers and provided an opportunity for hands-on involvement in coral reef protection
- Information signage and delineation of MPA's in the CNMI for visitors and residents to be aware of the locations of protected areas and to have better understanding of their existence

What is our vision for the next 10 years of the USCRTF

There is a need to reach agreement on a common goal or vision statement of what we are working towards as a collective body over the next 10 years to improve alignment between what is working in the jurisdictions and the work specifically done by and under the rubric of the USCRTF.

Our national conservation goal for coral reefs is:

To ensure the long-term viability, ecological integrity and sustainable use of the nation's and the world's coral reefs for future generations. (National Action Plan, 2000, p.20)

The Vision of the AIC is:

By ensuring coordination and cooperation within and between our jurisdictions and partners, we are able to manage and protect coral reef ecosystems and biological diversity for present and future generations to perpetuate cultural, environmental and economic values that are vital to our way of life. (AIC Strategic Plan 2008)

We are all working to halt further declines in coral abundance and diversity, to stabilize coral reef communities and establish environmental conditions which support coral resilience and recovery.

By the end of the next decade (2018), the AIC envisions that our nation will be a global leader in coral reef conservation with:

- increased awareness and appreciation of coral reef issues and threats with better informed communities engaged in choosing alternatives to activities that harm coral reefs;
- enhanced stewardship of coral reefs;
- strong local capacity and partnerships in the jurisdictions to manage coral reef conservation with a science-based ecosystem approach:
- increased capacity and staffing in jurisdictions to enable them to further address their coral reef management priorities;
- increased Federal agency engagement and participation in Washington DC and at local levels in all jurisdictions;
- strong partnerships with NGOs;
- bottom-up, locally-grown initiatives to ensure long-term sustainable use of coral reefs through enhanced Local Action Strategies;
- the USCRTF implementing new initiatives to reduce global threats to coral reefs;
- implementation of the All Islands Strategic Action Plan in collaboration with partners;
- the AIC providing effective advocacy for jurisdictional needs with robust policies; and
- an increase in the number of networks of marine protected areas to conserve and replenish coral reef ecosystems.

In addition to these reflections on the last decade of coral reef conservation efforts of the USCRTF, the AIC wishes to report on other developments:

NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP) External Review recommendations

The AIC strongly agrees with the findings of the External Review Panel and congratulates NOAA for taking the initiative to assess the past performance of the CRCP. We strongly agree with the Panel's recommendations and look

forward to working collaboratively with NOAA and the USCRTF to find ways to implement these.

Kacky Andrews took up her new position as Program Manager of the CRCP in December 2007. We welcome Kacky in this important role and fully support her vision for the new direction of the CRCP. We congratulate NOAA on selecting a coral reef manager and former POC to provide leadership for the CRCP.

The U.S. has an important leadership role in global coral reef issues. However, in spite of the excellent work of the CRCP, coral reefs worldwide continue to deteriorate. According to a recent New York Times article, a 2004 study estimated that global warming had destroyed 20 percent of the world's reefs since the 1950s. An additional 24 percent are under imminent threat of collapse, and a further 26 percent face eventual destruction. While much has been achieved, there is also still much more to do. The CRCP is now at a pivotal point and we stress the importance of moving from coral reef threat assessments towards effective, local actions focused on response. We all know the problems facing our coral reefs, it is time now for us to come together to support the implementation of more action strategies.

Implementation of the All Islands Strategic Action Plan

Since adoption of the AIC resolution to implement the Strategic Plan by the USCRTF in August 2007, the Secretariat has begun implementation of our plan.

The Committee is working collaboratively with each federal agency to seek advice and assistance on how they can be more fully engaged in implementing our initiatives and strategies to protect coral reefs. For instance the Committee held meetings this week with key representatives from USDA and USEPA. On Tuesday, the Committee held meetings with Congressional delegation staff to provide support for the CRCA.

Local Action Strategies

We remind USCRTF members that the LAS resolution adopted in American Samoa last August calls on all members to provide periodic progress reports and updates on their actions to implement and support the LAS in each jurisdiction.

Task Force Resolution on Global Warming

The Committee reaffirms Governor Togiola's call for action to address the threat of climate change to coral reefs and requests the Climate Change Working Group to report back to the USCRTF on their activities.

We acknowledge the need to address this issue by supporting a range of efforts, including strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that significantly contribute to climate change and ocean acidification. We again request that the

Task Force amend the National Action Strategy to reflect the Committee's concerns

International Year of the Reef 2008

Each jurisdiction has developed initiatives to celebrate IYOR which they will be reporting on in their presentations.

As this will be the last meeting for one of our longest serving Points of Contact (POC) on the AIC and the USCRTF, we wish to acknowledge the dedication and commitment of Athline Clark from Hawaii. As you may know, Athline will shortly take up her new position as Co-Manager of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. We thank her for her leadership and hard work and wish her well in her new position. We also welcome the new POC for Hawaii, Dr. Bob Nishimoto.

In conclusion, the Committee recommends the following actions by the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force:

- Develop a common goal, vision statement and action plan for the USCRTF and seek commitment from members for a renewed call to action by February 2009;
- Encourage more active engagement by ALL federal agencies in the implementation of each jurisdiction's coral reef management priorities and in the development of their own coral reef conservation implementation plans;
- Work collaboratively to support the implementation of the new direction for the NOAA CRCP in response to the External Program Review; and
- Request the Climate Change Working Group to report back on their activities at the next USCRTF meeting in Hawaii in August 2008.

Evangeline Lujan, Chair