

Coral conservation and the U.S. Endangered Species Act

What would listing mean? How can you comment?



Why are 82 corals being considered for protection under the Endangered Species Act?

The world's corals and coral reef ecosystems are in crisis. Nearly 20% of the world's coral reefs have already been lost, and approximately one-third of all zooxanthellate reef-building coral species are at risk of extinction according to the IUCN. Corals face widespread threats ranging from habitat destruction, pollution, overharvest, and disease—and now climate change. Warming ocean temperatures and ocean acidification due to greenhouse gas pollution threaten the continued survival of corals and coral reef ecosystems due to the increasing frequency of mass bleaching events and the dissolution of corals due to ocean acidification. Coral scientists have warned that unless CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere are reduced to below 350 parts per million soon, coral reefs and reef-dependant marine life will be committed to a terminal and irreversible decline.

If corals are to survive, they need relief from each of these threats, and the strong protections of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) can be a vital step toward the conservation of coral reefs. That is why, in 2009, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a [scientific petition](#) to protect numerous corals as threatened or endangered under the ESA. The petition focused on corals that occur in US waters and thus can benefit most from such protection, with estimated population declines of 30% or greater over 30 years according to the IUCN, and for which significant ongoing threats continue. The petition triggered a federal status review for 82 species of coral in Hawaii, the Caribbean, and Indo Pacific to determine if listing is warranted.

What would Endangered Species Act listing mean?

Listing these corals under the U.S. Endangered Species Act would provide a safety net for imperiled corals. The listing would require a recovery plan, habitat protections in US waters and make it unlawful to harm or kill corals. ESA listing also promotes greater awareness about threats to corals, and the listing process provides



Blue rice coral photo courtesy of Keoki Stender

opportunities for public awareness and involvement, which in turn, gives the public a stronger voice about coral conservation. Further, listing would provide greater focus and funding for coral conservation, restoration and research. And because the ESA requires that species be listed and protected based on the best available scientific information, listing ensures that management efforts are firmly rooted in sound science.

Most significantly, listing corals as threatened or endangered would require federal agencies to conserve and recover the coral species and to evaluate the impacts of U.S. government actions — including those that contribute to greenhouse gas pollution — on the listed corals. For example, this means that federally approved water pollution, dredging, and construction permits will have to account for the sensitivity of listed corals. This can result in better protection for coral reefs. Additionally, prior to permitting a project with significant greenhouse gas emissions the federal government may have to analyze the impacts of its action on corals and their habitat. This could result in emissions reductions or other measures that help conserve corals. The ESA can complement other efforts under the Clean Air Act, state efforts, or new climate legislation to reduce greenhouse gas pollution.

Overall, ESA listing of corals is an important part of a suite of conservation measures that are needed to protect corals.

How to comment on the coral listing?

In February 2010, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) [announced](#) that it will consider 82 coral species for listing under the Endangered Species Act based on the best available science. NMFS is soliciting information from the public, scientists, government agencies, and other interested parties on the status of these corals throughout their range.

Deadline: April 12, 2010

Submit online at: www.regulations.gov

Or mail comments to:

For species occurring in the Pacific Ocean:
Assistant Regional Administrator
Protected Resources Division
NMFS, Pacific Islands Regional Office
1601 Kapiolani Blvd., Suite 1110
Honolulu, HI 96814
Facsimile (fax): (907) 586-7012

For species occurring in the Atlantic Ocean:
Assistant Regional Administrator
Protected Resources Division
NMFS, Southeast Regional Office
263 13th Avenue South
St. Petersburg, FL 33701
Facsimile (fax): (727) 824-5309

What topics should comments cover?

NMFS is soliciting information on the topics listed below. However, comments need not be limited to these areas. Please discuss any relevant information.

- (1) Historical and current distribution and abundance of these species throughout their ranges (U.S. and foreign waters)
- (2) historic and current condition of these species and their habitat
- (3) population density and trends
- (4) effects of climate change on the distribution and condition of these coral species and other organisms in coral reef ecosystems over the short- and long-term

For more information, including the petition, the notice soliciting information, and other related documents visit: http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/coral_conservation/index.html .

(5) the effects of other threats including dredging, coastal development, coastal point source pollution, agricultural and land use practices, disease, predation, reef fishing, aquarium trade, physical damage from boats and anchors, marine debris, and aquatic invasive species on the distribution and abundance of these coral species over the short- and long-term

(6) management programs for conservation of these coral species, including mitigation measures related to any of the threats listed under (5) above.

It is also helpful to summarize your experience and qualifications in your letter and attach your curriculum vitae or resume.

What is the definition of a threatened or endangered species?

The ESA defines an endangered species as one that "is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range." A species is "threatened" if it is "likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future." ESA listing criteria include an evaluation of habitat destruction, over-harvest, disease, predation, other threats, and the inadequacy of existing regulations. Your comments on any of these factors can be helpful.

While it is not necessary to state a conclusion on whether a coral species should qualify as threatened or endangered, it can be useful if supported by scientific information.

What happens next in the listing process?

At the end of the comment period and status review after one year, NMFS will determine if listing each of the 82 coral species as threatened or endangered "is warranted." It will then issue a proposed rule for those deserving protection, and again solicit public comment and peer review. At the close of one year, NMFS must finalize that listing determination. These corals will not receive any protection under the ESA until the listing process is complete.