

# Suit ends in more protection for coral

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The federal government and a conservation group have reached a settlement agreement that creates protections for two endangered species that call the waters off the Florida Keys home.

The Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity had filed a lawsuit against the National Marine Fisheries Service for not doing enough to protect several endangered species including elkhorn and staghorn coral and smalltooth sawfish. The National Marine Fisheries Service on Friday agreed to a timetable for designating critical habitat for sawfish and coral, which are at risk of extinction.

The Endangered Species Act requires critical habitat designation for species as soon as they are listed under the act, but the protection rarely occurs without litigation that forces the government to uphold the law, said Miyoko Sakashita, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The National Marine Fisheries Service agreed to designate habitat for corals by Nov. 30, 2008, and for sawfish by Feb. 29, 2009. The agency also must devise plans to protect the habitat, Sakashita said.

"The government has agreed to draw lines on a map where these protected species' habitat needs to be protected," she said. "This settlement ensures that these animals still have a place to call home. It's no surprise that the most important way to protect endangered wildlife from extinction is by protecting and restoring its habitat."

Habitat loss is the primary cause of species endangerment in the United States, threatening 85 percent of the country's rarest animals, Sakashita said, citing the federal government's own data. Species that are granted critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act are twice as likely to recover as those without protected habitat, Sakashita said.

The federal government placed elkhorn and staghorn corals on the endangered species list in May 2006, after the Center for Biological Diversity proposed it. The group wanted to bring attention to the effects of global warming, such as coral bleaching from increased sea temperatures. The disease is becoming more prominent and devastating coral colonies across the world.

Elkhorn and staghorn are the dominant reef-building corals in Florida and the Caribbean. In the

past 30 years, they have suffered an 80 percent to 98 percent decline throughout their range due to bleaching from abnormally warm water, disease, pollution and other threats.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is developing a recovery plan for the smalltooth sawfish. The smalltooth sawfish, listed as endangered in April 2003, for decades had been overharvested for its sawlike tooth. The sawfish's range once ran from Texas to New Jersey. Now they are found almost entirely only in Southwest Florida, primarily in Florida Bay and near the Everglades.

Agricultural and commercial development, dredge-and-fill operations, boating, erosion, and pollution continue to threaten the smalltooth sawfish, biologists say.

"The reports we mainly get are from Charlotte Harbor to the Keys," said Tonya Wiley, a Mote Marine Laboratory research scientist who worked on a draft version of the sawfish recovery plan for the National Marine Fisheries Service. "That is a huge detraction from their historical range."