



Settlement provides protection to endangered coral, sawfish

By Daily News staff

A lawsuit settlement announced this afternoon will speed up overdue habitat protections for several marine species on the federal endangered species list.

The settlement between the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity and the National Marine Fisheries Service sets deadlines in early 2008 for the Fisheries Service to propose new protections for elkhorn and staghorn coral, the smalltooth sawfish and the green sturgeon. Final designations are due within the following year.

The corals, listed as a threatened species in May 2006, and the sawfish, listed as endangered in

April 2003, are found in Florida, the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico; the sturgeon, which was listed as threatened in April 2006, lives in California.

“This settlement ensures that these animals still have a place to call home,” attorney Miyoko Sakashita, representing the Center, said in a statement.

Abnormally warm water, disease and overfishing have caused an 80 to 98 percent decline in the range of the two corals in the past 30 years, according to the Center.

Southwest Florida is one of the odd-looking animals' last strongholds as a result of habitat degradation and getting their saws tangled in gillnets

banned in Florida since 1994. Their saw is valued by illegal trophy hunters.

The Endangered Species Act requires critical habitat be designated for endangered and threatened species within a year of getting put on the endangered species list.

Fisheries Service Assistant Regional Administrator David Bernhart, in St. Petersburg, blamed the missed deadlines for the corals and sawfish on the need for further research into the species' requirements for protection.

“We haven't been delaying, we've been moving as expeditiously as we can on it,” he said.