

Support 'endangered' designation

By Leda Cunningham

I love the water. My mom used to have to drag me out of the lake at the end of summer days spent playing "The Little Mermaid" with my sister back home. It wasn't until moving to our nation's land-locked capital many years later, however, that I truly appreciated not only how much the water means to me, but how important oceans are to countless aspects of life in this country. And our oceans need special attention right now.

Coral reefs, in particular, face an uncertain future. According to several recent studies, worldwide, over 25 percent of coral has already died and an additional 30 percent is currently endangered. Closer to home, Florida's reef system is in critical condition. A recent study at the University of Miami found that elkhorn and staghorn corals -- historically the dominant reef-building coral species in the Caribbean -- have declined 80 percent to 98 percent over the past 30 years.

A rich, vibrant ecosystem whose biodiversity rivals that of the Amazon, the coral reef is an underwater oasis of life. They occupy only 0.2 percent of the world's oceans yet coral reefs are home to over a quarter of all marine life, including over a million species of fish and invertebrates. Reefs serve as a nursery for countless marine organisms and as a natural shield protecting beaches from otherwise damaging wave action and storms.

Corals are also an invaluable economic asset. A 2001 study esti-

mated that in Southeast Florida alone, coral reefs are valued at almost \$8 billion with direct and indirect benefits to a wide array of industries. In one of its more underappreciated applications, coral provides an immeasurable supply of raw materials for developing new medicines for heart disease, ulcers, leukemia, skin cancer and AIDS.

In recognition of coral's value and to address threats facing Florida's reef system, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has recently proposed listing both elkhorn and staghorn coral as endangered species. The first-ever proposed designation of coral as an endangered species, the listing would require the federal government to develop a much-needed recovery plan and to financially strengthen coral reef protection efforts.

Protecting elkhorn and staghorn coral won't by itself save our oceans or completely reverse the damage to the Florida reef system, but it's a good start.

With an estimated \$60 billion in combined annual revenues from the U.S. commercial and recreational fishing, travel, dive and other watersports industries, what happens to our nation's oceans will pose enormous consequences for all of us.

More importantly, responsible stewardship of our oceans is the best legacy we can leave the next generation of Little Mermaids. Like the coral reef, our children depend

on us to make good conservation decisions today to ensure a healthy future.

Those who care about saving Florida's reef system should let our elected officials in Washington know. Supporting the proposal to list elkhorn and staghorn coral as endangered species is an important step toward a healthy future for America's coral reefs.

Leda Cunningham is the dive outreach coordinator for the Conserve Our Ocean Legacy Campaign in Washington, D.C. and the 2005 winner of the Dolores E. Fisher Award from the Mel Fisher Heritage Society in Key West.