

May 5, 2006

Two rare corals off South Florida beaches are declared endangered

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South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Two rare corals found off the shores of South Florida became the first coral designated for protection under the national Endangered Species Act.

Officials at the National Marine Fisheries Service announced Thursday that elkhorn and staghorn corals will be designated for protection.

Overfishing, marine diseases, pollution, storms and climate change have combined to threaten the existence of the once abundant, antler-shaped corals, officials said.

The decision is a response to a petition filed two years ago by the Center for Biological Diversity, a non-profit conservation organization, according to a fisheries service press release.

Brent Plater, a lawyer for the center, said including the corals on the endangered species federal register forces the creation of a recovery plan that will not only prevent further decay, but return the corals to their "historical abundance." Plater said

that the coral is still found in reefs stretching from Broward County into the Caribbean and all the way to Belize, but in sparse amounts compared to its historical levels. Over the past three decades, elkhorn and staghorn have decreased by about 97 percent, Plater said.

The major causes of the corals' destruction are linked to global warming, he said. Placing the corals on the endangered species list will "give us a tool to try to ratchet down the greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S.," Plater said.