

# Virgin Island Daily News

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## Enviro-activists fight to get V.I. corals on endangered list

By ALDETH LEWIN

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ST. THOMAS - The Center for Biological Diversity, a champion for the territory's rare plants and animals, once again is pressuring the federal government to protect 82 coral species - eight of which are found in the Virgin Islands.

Last week, the nonprofit environmental group filed a notice informing the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the center's intent to sue within 60 days unless a decision is made whether or not to list the corals under the Endangered Species Act.

The Center for Biological Diversity petitioned NOAA in October 2009 to have 82 corals protected. But failure to respond to the petition by the statutory deadline prompted the environmental group to file a notice of intent to sue.

Before a lawsuit was filed, the National Marine Fisheries Service announced that it was launching a full status review to determine whether the 82 corals warrant the protections of the Endangered Species Act. The agency's 90-day report found that all but one species warranted listing, and the Marine Fisheries Service said a full 12-month finding would be issued detailing the protections warranted under the Endangered Species Act.

However, that deadline has passed. The 12-month finding should have been filed Oct. 20, but no report has been filed to date, according to the Center for Biological Diversity's notice.

"Time is of the essence to protect coral reefs, the world's most endangered ecosystems," Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director at the center, said in a prepared statement. "Within a few decades, global warming and ocean acidification threaten to completely unravel magnificent coral reefs that took millions of years to build."

The 82 corals live in U.S. waters - ranging from Florida and

Hawaii to U.S. territories in the Caribbean and Pacific. The corals chosen for the list have shown declines of at least 30 percent during a 30-year period, according to the center.

The petition stated that the eight Caribbean corals - Lamareck's sheet coral, boulder star coral, mountainous star coral, star coral, pillar coral, elliptical star coral, rough cactus coral and large ivory coral - face multiple threats including bleaching, disease, stronger hurricanes and storms, pollution and sedimentation as a result of coastal development and chronic overfishing. In addition, all corals face a growing threat of extinction because of rising ocean temperatures caused by global warming and the related threat of ocean acidification, the petition stated.

Climate change can lead to warmer ocean temperatures, which can result in mass coral bleaching - which occurred in the territory in 2005. That year, bleaching and a possibly related, unknown, disease wiped out more than 60 percent of the coral population in the Virgin Islands.

Bleaching is when the colorful, living polyps on corals turn white after the warm water forces the coral to expel the symbiotic algae that they depend on for energy. While the coral can stay alive during the bleaching, it is unhealthy and often dies or succumbs to disease. It can recover from bleaching, but it is often a slow process that can take years.

Warm water temperatures in 2010 marked the second-most deadly year on record for corals because of bleaching, Sakashita said.

Higher levels of carbon dioxide in the air can lead to ocean acidification, which limits the amount of calcium the coral can draw out of the water to build their skeletons.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, scientists have warned that coral reefs are likely to be the first worldwide ecosystem to collapse because of global warming and predict

that all the world's reefs could be destroyed by 2050.

"Halting the extinction of coral reefs and the marine life that depends upon them is an enormous undertaking, and the Endangered Species Act has an important role to play," Sakashita said. "But without rapid reductions in CO2 pollution, the fate of the world's reefs will be sealed."

Protection under the Endangered Species Act would lead to more coral reef conservation because fishing, dumping, dredging and offshore oil development would be subject to federal regulation. Also, the protection would require federal agencies to ensure that their actions do not harm the coral species.

In 2006, elkhorn and staghorn corals became the first, and so far only, coral species protected under the Endangered Species Act. The listing of staghorn and elkhorn corals - both of which are found in the Virgin Islands - also came in response to a petition from the Center for Biological Diversity. The two species are listed as threatened.

For information on the group go online to [www.biologicaldiversity.org](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org).