

HONOLULU CIVIL BEAT

Finally, Help for Hawaii's Troubled Corals

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As anyone knows who's snorkeled or dived off Hawaiian shores, the islands' reefs are a treasure trove: with a keen eye and a little luck, you may spot a blue rice coral, table coral or ringed rice coral.

But these corals, and others around the world, are in deep peril. Climate change is warming their ocean home, making the unique animals far more susceptible to bleaching and death. Sea water is also becoming more acidic and corrosive as it absorbs carbon pollution, slowing and threatening to stop coral growth. These twin threats pile up on top of others the corals face, from disease and pollution to destruction by boats.

That's why it's so encouraging that several corals living off the coast of Hawaii have been proposed for Endangered Species Act protection. In late November the National Marine Fisheries Service proposed protecting 59 corals in the Pacific and seven in the Caribbean in response to a scientific petition filed by the Center for Biological Diversity in 2009.

Those safeguards can't come soon enough. The sad truth: Scientists predict 30 percent of the world's coral reefs could be killed off in the next 30 years.

This proposal to protect dozens of corals as endangered species should serve as a wake-up call that coral reefs are in crisis — across the globe, not just in U.S. waters. Unless things change, reefs as we know them will wink out. Many of these corals have been on a downward trajectory for years. The Fisheries Service says that, in the Indo-Pacific region that includes Hawaii, coral cover on reefs has declined from 50 percent to 20 percent since the 1970s. (The problem's worse in the Florida and the Caribbean, where it's declined from 50 percent to less than 10 percent today.)

If we're going to live in a world where future generations will know the beauty and bounty of ocean corals both in Hawaii and beyond, we've got to address the grave threats they face — and very quickly.



Listing these corals as "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act will help. It will mean additional protections for their habitat, a plan charting their recovery, prohibitions on harming or killing corals and, importantly, prohibition of federal actions that could jeopardize the future survival of these species, including drivers of climate change. When the protections are finalized, this won't close areas off or ban fishing; it will mean some federally permitted activities — say, military exercises, pollution discharges, dredging or shoreline development — will need to mitigate harms to corals.

This isn't just about saving corals. We need healthy coral reefs for our own good. Corals are home to about a quarter of the ocean's animals, which use corals for shelter, foraging and nurseries. Corals are also important for cultural practices, healthy fish populations, and boosting the tourist economy. Protecting the corals will mean protecting the vast, rich reef ecosystems that are Hawaii's natural heritage.