



SIERRA CLUB COMMENTS FOR THE U.S. CORAL REEF TASK FORCE – 8/27/2008

Task Force Chairs, members, and fellow participants: My name is Dave Raney, Chair of the Sierra Club’s Coral Reef Working Group, and a volunteer for Reef Check Hawai’i. As we welcome the return of the Task Force visit to the Hawaiian Islands, we can celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Task Force, as well as the many actions taken on behalf of coral reefs during this International Year of the Reef 2008. And, we can be grateful that we still have beautiful reefs here on the Big Island.

Yet, as we meet in this tranquil spot, and celebrate the many accomplishments of the Task Force and its partners, we find that much remains to be done. The State of the Reefs 2008 report released earlier this year contains a sobering message, summed up in this quote from the Executive Summary:

“Despite the investments made to date in managing and monitoring U.S. coral reef ecosystems and increasing management capacity at all levels, coral reef ecosystem resources have continued to decline over the short- and long-term. . . . Significant actions and bold protective measures are required if reef conditions are expected to improve in the future.” – State of the Reef 2008, page 8

Coral reef scientists meeting at the 11th International Coral Reef Symposium voiced similar concerns and prescriptions for action, including the following:

“A defining theme of the 11th International Coral reef Symposium is that the news for coral reef ecosystems is far from encouraging. Climate change is now much faster than in an ice-age transition, and coral reefs continue to suffer fever-high temperatures as well as sour ocean conditions. Corals may be falling behind, and there appears to be no special silver bullet remedy. Nevertheless, there are hopeful signs that we should not despair.

Reef ecosystems respond vigorously to protective measures and alleviation of stress. For concerned scientists, managers, conservationists, stakeholders, students, and citizens, there is a great role to play in continuing to report on the extreme threat that climate change represents to earth’s natural systems. Urgent action is needed to reduce CO₂ emissions. In the interim, we can and must buy time for coral reefs through increased protection from sewage, sediment, pollutants, overfishing, development, and other stressors, all of which we know can damage coral health.

The time to act is now. The canary in the coral-coal mine is dead, but we still have time to save the miners. We need effective management rooted in solid interdisciplinary science and coupled with stakeholder buy-in, working at local, regional, and international scales alongside global efforts to give reefs a chance. “ – 11th International Coral Reef Symposium, Outcomes Overview, Page 1.

The ICRS document goes into additional detail regarding the urgent need to curb CO₂ emissions:

“Ocean acidification and ocean warming can be thought of as the ‘evil twins’ of climate change. The same carbon dioxide that causes ocean warming is entering the oceans and causing chemical changes (i.e., lowered pH, lowered carbonate ion concentration) that affect marine life. Coral reefs are threatened because carbonate ions, essential for building their calcium carbonate skeletons, become less available. . . It has been suggested that to save reefs, we cannot exceed 450ppm CO₂ in seawater. At the world’s current rate of CO₂ emissions, we have 8-10 years to turn the tide.”

Some of us here today attended the Task Force meeting held on Maui. That was nine years ago, and global CO² emissions have increased between then and now. Clearly, the next nine years must be dramatically different, or we risk crossing the 450 ppm threshold and witnessing the demise of coral reefs as we know them.

There are signs of hope in this otherwise bleak scenario. Most world leaders have recognized the urgency of global actions to address greenhouse gas emissions. Both U.S. presidential candidates place high priority on addressing climate change. Many states and territories, including the State of Hawai'i and our Pacific island neighbors, have taken proactive stances on this issue. And, NGOs and millions of individuals are taking small actions that collectively become very large steps toward reducing carbon emissions worldwide. We have the opportunity, and the duty, to act now so that future generations have a cleaner planet no longer driven by the unsustainable use of fossil fuels. While we know coral reefs will face stresses from warmer, more acidic, ocean waters, it is important for us to take actions to reduce the other stressors affecting their survival. Here there has been progress.

Among the most dramatic achievements over the past ten years has been the protection of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, culminating in the designation of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. The Management Plan for the Monument is now being fashioned, and we strongly urge that the final version of this Plan includes a formal citizens' advisory committee with authorities and responsibilities patterned after the existing Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve Council.

On the other side of the country, citizens of South Florida, who many months ago alerted the Task Force of their concerns over the use of ocean outfalls for sewage disposal, have finally succeeded in convincing the Florida legislature to pass legislation phasing out those outfalls. Much of the credit for this goes to Palm Beach County Reef Rescue, a small NGO based in Palm Beach, whose persistence at gathering data and building coalitions finally prevailed. In the end there were many winners, including Surfrider Foundation, Sierra Club, and the many other members of the Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition -- and the citizens of, and visitors to, the State of Florida itself.

Closer to home, right here in Kona, community members gathered together about a decade ago to tackle the contentious issue of marine aquarium collection along their coastline. They also persisted for months stretching into years, to persuade the State legislature to pass legislation addressing their concerns. Much credit for this accomplishment goes to local resident Tina Owens, who formed the Lost Fish Coalition and continues to battle on behalf of our fishes. Sara Peck of Sea Grant also played a key role in that battle, and continues to undertake and support local efforts for coral reef conservation and outreach. And, Reef Check Hawai'i now has a cadre of volunteers active in Kona. There are numerous other groups and individuals in Hawai'i engaged in ongoing, place-based efforts to reverse the decline of our coral reef ecosystems and restore their health where possible. Many of these folks attended, or were represented at the Living Reefs Award Luncheon held Tuesday.

A few years ago, close to my home on O'ahu, a small group of community leaders committed themselves to the goal of restoring the marine life of Manua Bay – the portion of ocean stretching south from Diamondhead to Portlock, near Hanauma Bay. That effort has now blossomed, with strong support from The Nature Conservancy, into what may prove to be a model for addressing coral reef issues in developed, urbanized areas. The Corps of Engineers is engaged in exploring alternatives to channelization of streams for flood control, and other restoration opportunities are being sought, watershed by watershed.

Overfishing has proven to be a stubborn problem affecting the reefs of the Main Hawaiian Islands. Recent information gathered by Malama Manua Bay volunteers has revealed that large-scale night commercial fishing using multiple boats and scuba divers are occurring on a regular basis. Similar operations, apparently legal under existing Hawai'i laws, appear to be taking place on Maui reefs at night. We in Hawai'i are lagging behind our neighbors in American Samoa, who have banned the use of scuba for night fishing, and the CNMI, who ban the use of scuba for spearfishing altogether.

At this juncture, it would be great if we could declare "Mission Accomplished," and move on to other challenges. Instead, we must declare "We have only begun to fight," and vow to work even harder. The most important education and outreach efforts to undertake in coming months must be directed toward the incoming administration. With the recently revamped Task Force website, and revitalized Working Groups, we collectively are well-positioned to insure continuity while some folks at the head tables are allowed to resume normal lives. From the start, it has been clear that the Task Force had a special mission that inspired its participants. No one exemplifies this better than Task Force Chair Tim Keeney, who has provided dedicated and enthusiastic leadership during his tenure, and as a former Navy Seal, never hesitated to get up close and personal with coral reefs whenever and wherever he could.

Thank you for the opportunity to present these comments.