

Atchafalaya Basinkeeper • Big Blackfoot Riverkeeper • California Coastkeeper Alliance
Center for Biological Diversity • Colorado Ocean Coalition • Crystal Coast Waterkeeper
Cypress Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America • Debris Dree Oceans
Epic – Environmental Protection Information Center • Florida Coastal Ocean Coalition-SeaTurtle Conservancy
Florida Coastal Ocean Coalition-Surfrider Foundation • Florida Division of the Izaak Walton League of America
Florida Keys Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America • Florida Keys Environmental Fund, Inc.
Hands Across the Sand • Izaak Walton League of America • Klamath Forest Alliance • Milwaukee Riverkeeper
National Parks Conservation Association • Reef Relief • Roaring Fork Waterkeeper
Sierra Club, Broward Group • Sierra Club, Miami Group • South Florida Wildlands Association
Tennessee Riverkeeper • Tropical Audubon Society

September 27, 2016

Dear Members of the House Judiciary, House Science, Space, and Technology, and House Natural Resources Committees,

On behalf of the undersigned organizations and our millions of members and supporters nationwide, we urge you to oppose H.R. 5771 “Conserving Our Reefs and Livelihoods Act of 2016” (CORAL Act) (Ros-Lehtinen, R-FL), a reauthorization of the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000. While the bill contains limited positive provisions beneficial to coral conservation efforts, it also includes unnecessary and damaging language that undercuts the protection of coral reef ecosystems in America’s national parks. Please **oppose** this bill if it comes before your committee.

Coral reefs are invaluable ecosystem architects, providing coastline protection from storm surges, supporting valuable fishing and recreation industries, and creating some of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the world. Healthy coral reefs provide billions of dollars annually to the global economy and must be protected. Unfortunately, coral reefs nationwide have been steadily declining due to the impacts of climate change, water quality degradation, and overuse. Specifically, Caribbean reefs have declined by over 80% since the 1970’s.¹ Strong protection and adequate funding for coral reefs is necessary to increase resiliency to the impacts of climate change and mitigate damage caused by external impacts.

As a reauthorization of the Coral Reef Conservation Action of 2000, H.R. 5771 should focus on the restoration and conservation of America’s coral reefs. Instead, Section 302 of H.R. 5771 would block the National Park Service (NPS) from fulfilling its primary mission of preserving the resources and values of the National Park System, including its coral reefs. The provision undercuts the Park Service’s ability to protect marine and coastal resources in 88 coastal national parks around the country by preventing them from upholding their legal duty under the 1916 Organic Act to implement actions to protect the resources of our national parks. Section 302 would elevate recreational and commercial fishing access above all other interests and user groups in our national parks, regardless of conservation, safety, or any other considerations. National parks are held in trust for the benefit of *all* Americans, rather than one specific user group. These provisions could limit long-term protection of marine and lakeshore wildlife in numerous coastal national parks, such as Acadia National Park, Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, Channel Islands National Park, and Biscayne National Park.

As written, H.R. 5771 also contains provisions that hinder efforts to conserve and restore coral reef ecosystems in our national parks. Section 302 would, in effect, prevent the creation of a desperately needed marine reserve

¹ Gardner, T. A., Cote, I. M., Gill, J. A., Grant, A., & Watkinson, A. R. *Long-Term Region-Wide Declines in Caribbean Corals*. *Science*, 15 Aug 2003: Vol. 301, Issue 5635, pp. 958-906, DOI: 10.1126/science.1086050.

in Biscayne National Park, our country's largest marine national park where only six percent of corals are still alive² and some reef fish populations are on the verge of collapse.³ The creation of a small marine reserve, decided upon by the NPS after 15 years of extensive public debate, is urgently needed to help curtail the rapid decline of the park's threatened coral reef ecosystem.

A subsection of Section 302 prioritizes the use of state science in decision-making in national parks rather than the typical standard use of "best available science."

Furthermore, Section 109 of H.R. 5771 directs funding to industries affected by reef degradation, taking much-needed money away from active coral restoration, conservation, and recovery. We strongly believe that the best way to help struggling communities is to fund efforts that directly recover reefs themselves. Allocating funding directly to coral reef restoration, research, and conservation will allow for a sustainable source of income for communities and industries over the long-term, which will yield a far greater benefit to these communities than the proposed funding for industry included in Section 109 of H.R. 5771.

Without the damaging provisions included in **Sections 109 and 302**, the CORAL Act would provide many benefits for coral conservation and restoration activities. Specifically, we support the provision in Section 101 that allows for the quick release of emergency response funds for rapid response to and study of coral disease and unpredictable bleaching events, which can occur without much notice. We also support expanding the focus of the law to allow federal agencies and their partners to play an active role in restoration and recovery (Section 201). We must examine new restoration and recovery strategies in addition to protecting existing coral. Finally, we strongly support the emphasis on coral reef ecosystem resilience to emergency threats and the promotion of cooperative conservation, research, and restoration included in Section 101.

Though our organizations support components of the CORAL Act and reauthorization of the Coral Reef Conservation Act that focuses solely on coral conservation, restoration, and recovery, we strongly oppose the bill as written because it would block the conservation and protection of marine resources in America's national parks. Again, we urge you to **oppose** H.R. 5771 and encourage its sponsors to revise the legislation based on our aforementioned concerns, the removal of Section 302 and the language directing coral restoration funding to industries in Section 109. The inclusion of these controversial provisions in the CORAL Act deliberately blocks marine resource protection in national parks and contradicts the purpose of the original Coral Reef Conservation Act (2000) to protect and enhance America's coral reefs.

Sincerely,

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² National Park Service South Florida / Caribbean Network. 2013. Annual administrative report (FY 2012) and work plan (FY 2013) for inventories and Vital Signs monitoring: South Florida / Caribbean Network. Natural Resources Report NPS/SFCN/NRR—2013/702. National Park Service, Fort Collins, Colorado.

³ Ault, J. S., Smith, S. G., Meester, G. A., Luo, J., & Bohnsack, J. A. *Site characterization for Biscayne National Park: Assessment of fisheries resources and habitats*. NOAA Technical Memorandum 2001 NMFS-SEFSC-468.

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CC: Representative Ros-Lehtinen, Representative Curbelo, Representative Radewagen, Representative Pierluisi