

# REVITALIZING FLORIDA'S COASTS AND OCEANS: HOW TO PROTECT OUR MARINE LIFE, BEACHES, AND COASTAL WATERS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Natural Resources Defense Council  
Environmental Defense  
Caribbean Conservation Corporation  
Clean Water Network of Florida  
The Ocean Conservancy  
Surfrider Foundation  
Florida Public Interest Research Group  
National Wildlife Federation*

### **A Call to Action for Florida's Coast and Oceans**

Nothing defines Florida more than its coast. People come from around the world to swim, boat, scuba dive, surf, fish, kayak, enjoy our beaches, and see our unique coastal wildlife. The coast is Florida's economic engine. But alarming changes are taking place, from plummeting fish catches to outbreaks of harmful algae, dying marine life, and beach closures. In 2005, tourists were greeted with algae-covered beaches and dead fish, dolphins, sea turtles and manatees washing ashore. Our beaches are eroding away and our reefs and fisheries continue to decline.

A retiree trying his luck fishing off a pier in Pensacola describes one of the problems plainly: "Twelve years ago, you could catch three coolers (of fish) in three hours," he said. "Now, you're lucky to get a cooler in three days."<sup>1</sup>

Florida restaurants, once renowned for fresh local seafood, are coming up short on popular local dishes as species decline and reliance on foreign imports grows. Higher prices at local seafood markets are forcing consumers to turn to farm-raised imported seafood. Both commercial fishermen and recreational anglers are frustrated at having catch limits reduced on many species. Once-abundant species in the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico, including red snapper, a variety of groupers, red drum, amberjack, and black sea bass, are classified by the government as "overfished," or severely depleted. Many wild Florida fish are too contaminated with mercury to eat.

Florida's next governor can – and must – boldly act to stop this alarming decline and to reform coastal management policies before we lose the natural resources that fuel our economy and our identity as Floridians. Among the states, Florida has much to lose: Nearly 86 million tourists visited in 2005, making Florida one of the most popular travel destinations in the world. Tourism generated more than \$63 billion in 2005 and created more than 944,000 jobs.<sup>2</sup> The state is the

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<sup>1</sup> Naples Daily News: "Deep Trouble: The Gulf in Peril," Sept. 30, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Visit Florida, The Official Tourism Marketing Agency of the State of Florida, personal communication, May, 2006

number 1 SCUBA diving destination in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> and produces the world's top surfers,<sup>4</sup> Florida's recreational fishery is among the largest in the country.<sup>5</sup> Recreational fishing expenditures are \$8.3 billion, including everything from food, lodging, bait, charter, equipment and gas.<sup>6</sup>

The state has talked about optimizing resource protection using ecosystem based management principles since the 1980s. The time is politically ripe for explicit implementation of pro-active tools for sustainable ocean and coastal management in Florida. Florida's coastal constituency is alarmed and growing in size and voice. Solutions must involve smart business strategies that recognize that the natural environment is a capital asset and that emphasize creative cooperation between the business and environmental communities

*Revitalizing Florida's Coasts and Oceans: How to Protect our Marine Life, Beaches and Coastal Waters* identifies the major threats to the health and continued productivity of Florida's ocean and coast: unwise coastal development, pollution, offshore oil drilling, destructive fishing practices, lack of a comprehensive management system, and global warming. It then recommends actions to address these threats for state policy makers, including the governor, cabinet, legislature, and public.

Florida has the opportunity to be a leader in reversing the decline of marine and coastal resources. Two national blue-ribbon panels, the United States Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission, recently reviewed the state of America's declining ocean resources. They comprised the first such review in 35 years.<sup>7</sup> Their reports are a sobering look at the incredible resources that are being lost, right before our eyes. After exhaustive research, both commissions made recommendations to policy makers about critical changes needed in existing ocean and coastal laws and management. The commissions' findings stand as a strong call to action to every coastal state and underscore the specific actions needed in Florida.

We call upon Florida's incoming governor and legislature to:

## **Curb Unwise Development and Protect Coastal Habitats**

- Give high priority to protecting dwindling coastal habitats including reefs, coastal forests, dunes, beaches and coastal wetlands to provide buffer from sea level rise, storm surge, and to protect Florida's fisheries. Florida should review and strengthen coastal setback laws and strictly enforce the coastal habitat protection policies and laws already on the books.
- Reduce subsidies that encourage growth in high-risk areas or in sensitive coastal systems. Florida subsidizes coastal growth in many ways—for example, by financing infrastructure in coastal high hazard areas, beach renourishment, and homeowner's insurance -- so that the true cost of high-risk coastal development isn't apparent. Coastal development will be more equitable and sustainable when the private sector assumes more of the risks.

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<sup>3</sup> Florida's Ocean Strategies, Florida Governor's Ocean Committee, Final Report to the Governor, June 1999

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.visitflorida.com/cms/d/surf\\_contests\\_in\\_florida.php](http://www.visitflorida.com/cms/d/surf_contests_in_florida.php)

<sup>5</sup> Florida Wildlife Research Institute, <http://research.myfwc.com/features>

<sup>6</sup> Miami Herald, "Saltwater Fish Face Uncertain Future," Oct. 16, 2005

<sup>7</sup> "America's Living Oceans: Charting A Course For Sea Change," Pew Oceans Commission, May 2003; United States Commission on Ocean Policy, "An Ocean Blueprint for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," September 2004

## **Reduce Coastal and Ocean Pollution**

- Halt the state's misguided efforts to weaken water quality standards and instead develop stronger standards, including numeric criteria for nutrients.
- Require developers who apply for Environmental Resource Permits (ERP) to prove they have first made all efforts to avoid impacts to the state's water resources. The ERP has become a program where developers are entitled to a permit as long as they simply offer mitigation. Independent experts have repeatedly documented that wetlands mitigation has not lived up to its promise.<sup>8</sup> In light of this, the state should not allow any more avoidable wetlands destruction
- Oppose offshore drilling and related activity off the Florida coast. The entire central and western Gulf of Mexico is open to offshore drilling. The eastern Gulf waters off Florida's coast should remain free from such industrialization.
- Support renewal of the annual congressional moratorium against new offshore drilling leasing. This 25-year, bi-partisan moratorium on offshore oil and gas leasing is Florida's most important protection against drilling activity.

## **Restore Marine Ecosystems, Ensure Robust Fisheries, and Protect Marine Species**

- Focus on managing special places and ecosystems (e.g., state aquatic preserves, national parks, and coral reefs) rather than just individual species. To that end, integrate the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's marine fisheries management with the Department of Environmental Protection's management of submerged sovereign lands, coastal ecosystems, and environmental quality. Florida's complex coastal systems require place-based, multi-species management, not simply old single-species methods that ignore many biological connections among management decisions.
- Redefine the principal objective of marine fishery policy to be the protection of marine ecosystems. The health of marine systems must be the overarching goal; without healthy ecosystems, there can be no healthy fish populations. Additionally, fishing can profoundly affect habitats and the integrity, productivity and stability of marine ecosystems. State agencies should work more closely with federal agencies to protect essential fish habitat and clean water, cornerstones of fisheries management.
- Renew the state's commitment to protecting the beach and dune system from overdevelopment. The fate of Florida's rare sea turtles is at stake. The state allows high-density development right up to, and on top of, the frontal dunes of critically eroding beaches. To protect sea turtle nesting beaches, Florida must develop new coastal management policies that lessen developmental pressures on critically eroding shorelines and reduce the need for renourishment and sea walls.

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<sup>8</sup> "Compensating for Wetlands Losses Under the Clean Water Act," National Research Council, 2001

- Discourage beach renourishment during sea turtle nesting season. The “one-size-fits-all” (large, square and flat) approach to beach nourishment should be modified. Environment-friendly beach building designs should be researched and employed to protect nearshore reefs and critical turtle nesting beaches.
- Better enforce state regulations to protect seagrass beds that provide habitat for valuable fishes, sea turtles and manatees. Fund a substantial increase in the number of law enforcement officers in the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, as well as regulatory personnel in the Department of Environmental Protection. Penalties for violating regulations that protect manatees and their habitats should be increased.

### **Strengthen Ocean Governance**

- Hold a Governor’s Ocean and Coastal Symposium in the first six months of the new governor’s administration to develop a plan of action for better oceans and coastal protection. This plan’s implementation should be a top priority for Florida’s new government leaders and will be an opportunity to reach out to Florida’s coastal constituency.
- Create an Ocean and Coastal Policy office in the executive office of Florida’s governor to coordinate scattered programs and provide unified leadership for coastal and ocean management.
- Restore the operating budget of the Florida Oceans and Coastal Resources Council, and encourage the Florida Legislature and next governor to support and fund the council’s work and the ocean research priorities it identifies.

### **Reduce Global Warming Pollution**

- Reduce the pollution that causes global warming. The most important measure Florida can implement is a mandatory “cap-and-trade” program for greenhouse gas emissions. A number of other actions will make a difference, including strengthening local, state and federal policies to cut dependence on fossil fuels by promoting energy efficiency, renewable energy and cleaner transportation options; encouraging protection and restoration of natural habitats (wetlands, grasslands, forests) that have a net use of carbon dioxide (often called carbon sequestration); setting specific limits on the nation’s global warming pollution; and re-engaging in international cooperation on global warming. Solutions also must involve smart business strategies that recognize that the natural environment is a capital asset and that emphasize creative cooperation between the business and environmental communities.
- Develop and implement more rigorous fishery and coastal resource management strategies that fully incorporate the likely impacts of global warming on key habitats, such as reefs and coastal wetlands.