



New England Fishery Management Council - News

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East Coast Fishery Managers Sign Agreement to Coordinate Deep Sea Coral Conservation

The Chairmen of the South Atlantic, Mid-Atlantic, and New England Fishery Management Councils signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) this month to help coordinate the protection of deep sea corals off the east coast of the United States from Maine to eastern Florida.

The MOU will serve as a framework for cooperation during the development and implementation of management measures to protect deep sea corals. Rather than establish specific requirements for each council, the MOU identifies areas of consensus and strategies to promote more effective coordination of deep sea coral conservation efforts among the councils. [Click here for the full MOU.](#)

Over the past three decades, marine researchers have discovered highly diverse deep sea coral communities on the continental shelf and slope off much of the east coast. These deep sea coral communities play an important role in the marine ecosystem and provide habitat for many species of fish and invertebrates.

Most deep sea corals are slow-growing and fragile, making them particularly vulnerable to damage from certain types of fishing gear such as bottom trawls. A wide variety of species have been discovered off the Atlantic coast, ranging from large, structure-forming types to small, solitary species. Some, such as *Oculina varicosa* found in the South Atlantic region, form tall pinnacles that can reach heights of more than 100 feet. One mound discovered in the South Atlantic was estimated to be between 1,000 to 1,500 years old.

Many recent deep sea coral discoveries have been the result of NOAA's Deep Sea Coral Research and Technology Program. Launched in 2009, the program has conducted in-depth deep water coral research on specific regions of the U.S., including the South Atlantic (2009-2011) and the Northeast (2013-2015). High-resolution bathymetry mapping combined with videos and samples from remotely operated vehicles (ROV) have revealed additional coral habitats in all regions while also giving the public a window into the ocean's depths through live underwater video feeds. *Learn more about the program at <http://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/>.*

Meanwhile, council actions to protect deep sea corals have been ongoing for some years. The South Atlantic Council has managed both shallow water corals and deep sea corals as part of its Coral, Coral Reef and Live/Hardbottom Fishery Management Plan for more than two decades. In 2010, it created the largest deepwater coral protected area off the Atlantic coast with the designation of five areas as Deepwater Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern, providing protection from potential threats from fishing gear, energy exploration and development, and other human impacts.

The Mid-Atlantic Council is considering several types of protection, such as designation of "deep sea coral zones" where management measures would be applied in areas where corals are present. The New England Council is considering similar protections for areas in the Gulf of Maine, canyon areas off Georges Bank and Southern New England, and for the four New England seamounts in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone.

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The three regional fishery management councils are responsible for developing regulations for more than 114 species of fish and shellfish in federal waters (3-200 miles from shore) off the eastern seaboard and for protecting important fish habitats, including preventing fishing activities from damaging marine habitats.

Learn More About Each Council's Coral Conservation Activities and NOAA's Research

New England Council: www.nefmc.org/habitat/index

Mid-Atlantic Council: www.mafmc.org/actions/msb/am16

South Atlantic Council:

www.safmc.net/ecosystem/HabitatManagement/DeepwaterCorals/tabid/229/Default.aspx

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