

# Deep Sea Coral Protection Around the World



A recent report published by the United Nations Environment Programme concluded that “active [fishing] gear that comes into contact with the sea floor is considered the **greatest threat to cold-water coral reefs and includes bottom trawls and dredges**” (Cold-Water Coral Reefs: out of sight - no longer out of mind, Friewald et al. 2004). The U.S. National Research Council also recently concluded that “**habitat complexity is reduced by towed bottom gear that removes or damages biological and physical structure . . . there is enough information currently available to support efforts to improve the management of the effects of fishing gear on seafloor habitats**” (NRC, Effects of Trawling and Dredging on Seafloor Habitat, 2002). And 1,136 scientists from 64 countries issued a statement in 2004 calling for protection of deep sea coral ecosystems.

Countries around the world have already taken action to protect deep sea corals in their waters. It was a matter of weeks in 1999 after Norway published pictures of its damaged lophelia coral reefs before the government had closed that area to bottom fishing. Off Australia, 15 seamounts were protected after submersible video footage showed that bottom trawlers targeting orange roughly had stripped one of the seamounts down to bare rock. Most recently, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) marked World Environment Day 2004 by releasing a report on deep sea corals and issuing a global conservation challenge to protect these species.



Global distribution of deep sea corals: points on the map indicate locations of observed coral concentrations of varying size and stages of development. The high density of reefs shown in the North Atlantic reflects the intensity of research in this region. Further discoveries are expected worldwide, particularly in the deeper waters of subtropical and tropical regions. Source for map: A. Friewald and other sources (2004).

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Examples of other countries that have already taken action to protect deep sea corals:

- 1999, Jan 2003 – **Norway** has banned bottom trawling on 6 deep sea coral reefs, covering over 2000 km<sup>2</sup>, creating Europe's largest deep sea coral protected area and more areas are proposed for protection.
- **Ireland** mapped their deep sea coral habitats and listed 4 sites for future protected areas.
- May 2004 – **Canada** permanently closed 2,364 km<sup>2</sup> of corals in “the Gully” off of Nova Scotia to bottom trawling.
- March 2004 – **EU** permanently closed Darwin Mounds (100 km<sup>2</sup>), off Scotland, to bottom trawling.
- 1999, 2003 – **Australia** created a network of 15 seamounts, covering 370 km<sup>2</sup>, which ban bottom trawling. The network covers 20% of the Tasmanian Seamounts. On one seamount, 90% of deep sea corals had already been destroyed by bottom trawls.
- 2001 – **New Zealand** protected 19 seamounts, comprising 40,000 km<sup>2</sup>, from bottom trawling.

**“Human activities pose the most significant threat to deep-sea corals. Slow growing coral species may live for centuries, yet be destroyed in seconds by human activities such as trawling, dredging, and natural resource exploration. Destructive fishing practices have been shown to remove coral forests, and leave rubble behind which has far less value as essential fish habitat”** (NOAA, Summary of Deep-Sea Corals Workshop, June 2003).

Protection of deep sea corals in the United States currently occurs under the Magnuson-Stevens Act – the law responsible for regulating fisheries, which breaks management of U.S. fisheries into 8 regions. Deep sea corals are managed under the Act as “fish” and some regions even allow directed take of some deep sea coral species to be used for jewelry. Protecting deep sea corals under the Magnuson-Stevens Act has been a slow and varied process that has resulted in a variety of levels of protection. Often, corals are protected from one fishery but not another, meaning that they are still being damaged by bottom trawls, or only small areas are closed.

- **Western Pacific:** banned bottom trawling throughout the region in 1986; allows directed take of some deep sea coral species (a.k.a. “precious corals”) for the jewelry industry
- **Pacific:** restricts gear size depending on area fished; bottom trawls prohibited in some fisheries, not others
- **North Pacific:** bottom trawling only allowed in the Aleutian Islands in the 4% of waters that have been trawled since 1990; some areas of potential or identified deep sea corals in the Gulf of Alaska, including seamounts, are closed to bottom trawling; study being done on protections needed in the Bering Sea
- **Caribbean:** no regulations of bottom trawling; fishermen have thus far not chosen to fish with bottom trawls
- **Gulf of Mexico:** rollers not allowed in reef fish stressed area; some areas closed to bottom trawls to protect sensitive habitat or reduce gear conflicts
- **South Atlantic:** bottom trawls prohibited in some fisheries, not others; some areas closed to bottom trawls to protect sensitive habitat
- **Mid-Atlantic and New England:** roller restrictions while pursuing some fisheries, not others; closures of two canyons to prevent bottom trawl fisheries from expanding into some areas with identified or potential deep sea corals

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