



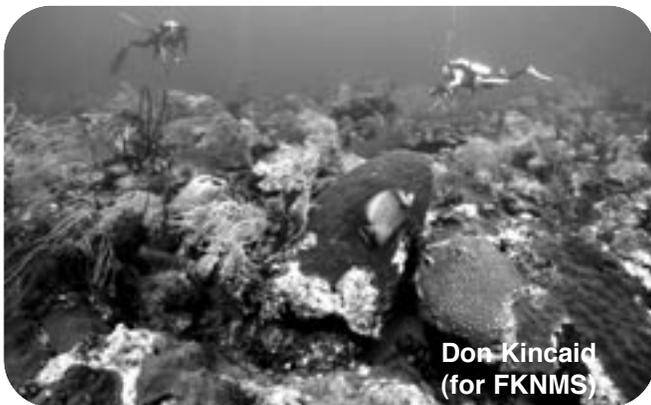
Tortugas: A Legacy of Ocean Wilderness

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One hundred years ago, forward-thinking leaders in this country tested the concept of preserving areas rich in natural and cultural heritage. The result of their inspiration, the National Park System, spurred a lasting legacy of public natural resource protection. To this day our national parks, preserves, and protected lands serve a vital role in sustaining the cultural and natural heritage of an ever-changing America. In the 21st century, as human development moves beyond land ecosystems to the coast, it is fitting that the focus of protection should shift to the ocean.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary implements a variety of strategies to protect our local ocean resources. One strategy, marine zoning, uses a common sense approach. Much like zoning on land, marine zoning separates activities into specific areas. Ecological Reserves, Sanctuary Preservation Areas, and Special Use Areas have been used in the Sanctuary since 1997 to protect key species and habitats. The establishment

of the Tortugas Ecological Reserve, a permanent, 151 square nautical mile “no-take” reserve, marks the beginning of an important era in marine conservation for not only the Sanctuary, but also the entire country. Designed with the best available scientific information in mind and with extensive input from the public and user groups, the Tortugas Ecological Reserve promises to ensure a legacy of ocean wilderness in the Florida Keys.



Two divers take photographs of Sherwood Forest's rich coral reefs in Tortugas North.

The concept of fully protected marine areas, or “reserves”, has been relatively slow to catch on in the United States. For the past century, collapses in fish stocks and a growing list of global problems such as pollution and climate change have shown that single-species or single-issue policies are not successful for managing complex ocean resources.

In contrast, marine reserves provide an effective and simple tool for conserving all of the creatures, habitats, and associated biological processes contained in certain critical areas. Reserves not only conserve marine ecosystems effectively, they restore the ecological integrity of impacted areas, provided the reserve offers protection to all inhabitants and includes diverse habitats. Areas located adjacent to reserves benefit from their protected status when marine species move across reserve boundaries. Also, free-floating larvae spawned in a reserve are likely to populate adjacent areas when ocean currents disperse them.

The Tortugas region of the Florida Keys is ideal for the establishment of a marine reserve for several reasons, the most important of which may be its central location in broad-scale oceanic circulation. Marine larvae from the pristine habitats of the Tortugas are carried by ocean currents to the east coast of Florida and beyond, helping sustain populations of lobster, fish, and other marine life in these areas. The presence of hundreds of marine species (220 fish species alone) and complex habitats are a tribute to the diversity of the Tortugas. The new Tortugas Ecological Reserve will protect many of these unique and, until now, threatened species and habitats.

With the establishment of the Tortugas Ecological Reserve, the Sanctuary has created a seascape of promise – a place where the ecosystem's full potential can be realized and that humans can learn from and respect. Please join the Sanctuary in celebrating this wonderful accomplishment.

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