



Executive Summary

National Survey on Public Knowledge and Attitudes About Coral Reefs

This summary reports key findings from a nationwide survey of 1000 American adults. Interviews conducted between May 29th and June 3rd, 2002. Sample for the survey was generated using a Random Digit Dial method to ensure that all households had an equal chance of being reached by the survey. The demographic and geographic distribution of the survey results matches the demographic and geographic distribution of the adult population within the margin of sampling error. The margin of error for the sample as a whole is +/- 3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For exact question wording and question order please refer to the attached questionnaire document.

While The Public Feels They Know Little, They Believe That Reefs Are In Trouble

Many Americans feel they know little about the state of coral reefs, even those segments who have experienced more interaction with them. Just over half of those surveyed (53%) say they have heard “not much” (35%) or nothing at all (18%) about the current state of coral reefs, compared to just 13% who feel they have heard a “great deal” and 34% who have heard “some.” While those who have visited reefs are more likely to feel knowledgeable, only about a third of them say they know a “great deal.”

Most Americans rate the health of reefs worldwide as “only fair” (35%) or poor (21%) for a total of 56% rating reef health in the negative. While 14% rate reef health positively (excellent or good), nearly 1-in-3 (31%) aren’t sure how reefs are faring, underscoring their lack of reef awareness.

Americans Believe a Significant Percentage of Reefs Are Fully-Protected From Damaging Activities

On average, the public believes that 27% of reefs worldwide are fully protected from the activities that can damage them. Even those with greater exposure to reefs believe this large an amount is protected. For example, those who have visited US reefs also believe 27% are fully-protected and among SCUBA divers that number is 25%. These perceptions may be partly indicative of the public’s lack of knowledge about the specific activities that can cause damage to coral reefs.

At the same time they believe that more than a quarter of coral reefs are protected, the public is suspicious about the efficacy of these protections. When asked how effective current regulations to protect reefs are the public is divided with 34% saying they are ineffective, 31% saying current regulations are effective and 35% saying they simply don't know.

When asked how serious a problem various activities are to the health of coral reefs, pollution and harmful fishing practices are seen as the top threats. In particular, "water pollution from oil, chemicals, fertilizer and sewage" (77% very serious threat) and "fishing like using dynamite and cyanide" (69% very serious threat) are viewed as most harmful. Also of concern are bilge water dumped from cruise ships (59% very serious threat); increased development, water usage and sewage outflow (57% very serious threat) and overfishing of species important to coral reef systems (53% very serious threat).

Deep and Widespread Support Exists for Designating Coral Reefs as Protected Areas and Americans Want the U.S. To Take a Leadership Role on Coral Reefs

Seventy-eight percent of Americans support designating coral reefs as protected areas, including some areas that would prohibit all extractive activities and 56% favor this concept "strongly." Comparatively only 10% are opposed to this idea and 12% are uncertain. Support for designating coral reefs as marine protected areas is almost identical to public support found in the SeaWeb national survey conducted in 1999 to establish areas of the ocean in U.S. territorial waters MPAs (75% support, 10% oppose, 15% undecided).

Strong support for designating coral reefs as protected areas, including some areas that would prohibit all extractive activities extends across all demographic and geographic groups. Across the country (81% Northeast, 76% South, 75% Midwest, 80% West) and across partisan political lines (75% Republicans, 78% Democrats, 79% Independents) Americans support this idea. Support is particularly strong amongst two segments of the population most likely to interact with reefs – divers and snorkelers (85% support) and saltwater recreational fishers (77% support).

The Public Puts the Onus on Government, Public and Private Institutions to Protect Coral Reefs

Americans are nearly unanimous (85%) in their belief that it is important for the U.S. to take a leadership role on this issue and that regulations should be used to ensure best conservation practices. Further 90% believe that it is important for zoos, public aquariums and other museums commit to only purchasing coral reef animals like fish and coral that have been collected using the best conservation practices.

Few Americans Have Experienced Coral Reefs, but Many Plan To And They Will Take Reef Protection into Account When Vacationing

Relatively few Americans have had direct interactions with coral reefs here or abroad. A quarter of Americans (25%) have visited coral reef areas in the United States, though only 14% have directly experienced the reefs on those visited. Likewise while 15% have visited areas abroad with coral reefs, only 12% directly experienced the reefs. When it comes to

cruises, Americans are even less likely to experience the reefs with 13% taking cruises, but only 6% interacting with reefs on those trips. Nonetheless, many (43%) plan to visit areas with reefs in the U.S. for future vacations, and 31% plan to visit reefs areas abroad in the next few years, representing a significant opportunity to communicate with Americans at the point of contact with the reefs.

While Americans place much of the responsibility for reef protection on government, they are also willing to make personal consumption choices or contributions to reef conservation when visiting these areas. When asked to consider the total cost of a vacation to a coral reef area, Americans are willing to add meaningful sums to support the conservation of the coral reefs in that area, assuming the knew the money was dedicated to the protection and scientific research of the reef. Seventy-two percent would pay an additional \$10 fee per person, 65% would pay an additional \$20 per person and fully 51% would pay an additional \$50 per person. A surprising third (35%) would pay as much as \$100 more per person.

When it comes to cruise vacations, 78% of Americans surveyed would be less likely to travel on a cruise ship that causes pollution on coral reefs through the discharge of waste and bilge water. Half (51%) are “much less likely” to take the trip.

For a complete report of the data, please visit the Coral Reef Foundation’s website at <http://www.coralreeffoundation.org>

This survey was sponsored by the Coral Reef Foundation, SeaWeb, The Curtis and Edith Munson Foundation, and The Henry Foundation.