

Belize

Takes Action to Save Coral Reefs & Fisheries



WCS Congratulates Belize For Taking Major Steps For Marine Conservation

The Government of Belize announced in April, 2009 a sweeping set of new laws to protect its extensive coral reefs, considered to be some of the most pristine in the Western Hemisphere. These laws resulted after Wildlife Conservation Society scientists, from their Glover's Reef Research Station, helped alert the Central American country's policy makers of the impact overfishing was having on the health of corals—already under threat from climate change and pollution.

A string of three offshore atolls, hundreds of sand cays and patch reefs, mangrove forests, coastal lagoons, and estuaries comprise the Belize Barrier Reef system. Within it, thrive around 500 species of fish, 134 bird species, three types of nesting sea turtles, and one of the highest populations of West Indian manatees. Despite the area's status as a World Heritage Site, overfishing is taking a toll on its groupers and herbivorous fish, with cascading effects on the rest of the ecosystem. Belize's new regula-

tions protect grazing fish such as parrotfish, limit the fishing of endangered Nassau groupers, ban spearfishing in all marine reserves, and add no fishing zones in two marine reserves.

"We applaud the Government of Belize for these progressive new laws that will ensure a future for coral reefs in the region," said Dr. Steven E. Sanderson, President and CEO of the Wildlife Conservation Society. "Belize has set a new standard for coral reef and fisheries protection in the Caribbean."

The first set of laws protects parrotfish and other grazers, including doctor and surgeon fish. WCS studies show that these grazing fish keep algae growth in check, and thereby encourage new coral growth. In years past, fishermen would target mainly snappers and groupers, not grazers. But as the numbers of snappers and groupers declined, fishermen turned to the next tier of the food web, namely herbivores—in particular, parrotfish.

WCS catch data now list parrotfish as the most commonly caught species at Glover's Reef. As these grazers are fished out, the corals' coverage area shrinks. But with parrotfish and other herbivores now under protection, the fish will keep the algae at bay, allowing the coral to grow and the percentage of live coral cover to rebound.

New minimum and maximum fishing limits for Nassau grouper (listed as endangered on IUCN's red list) are also in place to curb the dramatic declines of this species within Belizean waters. The general practice of fishermen cutting their catch into fillets at sea makes it difficult to monitor species catch rates. Now, any Nassau groupers caught must be brought back to the dock whole. The law also requires other types of fillets to retain a patch of skin for identification.

The Belizean government also outlawed spearfishing in all of its marine reserves. This is the preferred method for catching grazing fish, Nassau groupers, and other groupers. Within two of these reserves—South Water Caye and Sapodilla Cayes—zones now exist that prohibit fishing altogether. One such “no take” zone is Pelican Caye, a biodiversity

hotspot for rare sponges and tunicates, or “sea squirts”.

In the late 1980's, WCS began plans to build Glover's Reef Research Station, located 28 miles offshore on Glover's Middle Key. Since its opening in 1997, this state-of-the-art research station has hosted marine scientists and students from all over the world and serves as a platform for reef conservation in greater Belize.

WCS's marine conservation work in Belize was made possible in part by the generous support of The Summit Foundation, the Oak Foundation, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

WCS leads an impressive and broad range of conservation initiatives in Belize, including research on important coral seascapes and iconic ocean giants such as whale sharks and sea turtles. WCS also runs a state-of-the-art research center, Glover's Reef Marine Research Station. Conservation in Belize can benefit with your support! Donate at wcs.org. For more information: marineprogram@wcs.org.



The Wildlife Conservation Society saves wildlife and wild places worldwide. We do so through science, global conservation, education and the management of the world's largest system of urban wildlife parks, led by the flagship Bronx Zoo. Together these activities change attitudes towards nature and help people imagine wildlife and humans living in harmony. WCS is committed to this mission because it is essential to the integrity of life on Earth.

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Take Action for Corals

The threats to Belize's barrier reef and marine wildlife are mirrored throughout the world's oceans. Become an ambassador for ocean conservation by eating seafood from well-managed fisheries. Ask your favorite restaurants and grocery stores to sell ocean friendly products and limit your use of plastic bags as these can resemble jellyfish to hungry sea turtles. Learn more about WCS and our oceans at wcs.org/marine.