



AZA-Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project

www.aza.org/coral-reef-rescue

For additional information or to connect with the AZA-FRTRP directly, please contact the AZA-FRTRP Coordinator, Beth Firchau, bfirchau@aza.org

Who We Are:

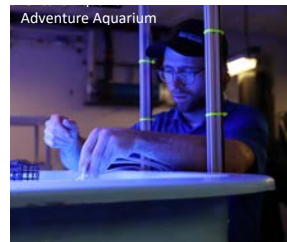
The [Association of Zoos and Aquariums' Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project](#) (AZA-FRTRP) is a member driven coral conservation network turning the tide on an environmental crisis causing critical habitat loss along the Florida Reef Tract (FRT) – North America’s largest bank reef.

With leadership from four Florida organizations, Disney Conservation, Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium, Sea World, and The Florida Aquarium, select facilities are working with federal and state agencies to save stony coral tissue loss disease susceptible corals species along the FRT. Since March of 2019, and to date, nearly 2000 corals have been placed in 21 facilities managed by AZA-accredited institutions in 14 states. Land-based facilities, called nurseries, are housing and aquarium biologists are caring for corals removed from the FRT while researchers try to better understand the disease, its impact on the reef, and how future outbreaks can be managed. The AZA’s current holding institutions **(as of 6-6-25)** include:



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| Adventure Aquarium | NJ |
| Blank Park Zoo | IA |
| Butterfly Pavilion | CO |
| Columbus Zoo and Aquarium | OH |
| Denver Zoo | CO |
| Florida Coral Rescue Center* | FL |
| Georgia Aquarium | GA |
| Jenkinson's Aquarium | NJ |
| Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium | FL |
| Nashville Zoo | TN |
| National Aquarium | MD |
| National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium | IA |
| North Carolina Aquariums – Pine Knoll Shores | NC |
| Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo | NE |
| Riverbanks Zoo & Garden | SC |
| SEA LIFE at LEGOLAND California Resort | CA |
| SEA LIFE Michigan Aquarium | MI |
| SEA LIFE Orlando | FL |
| SEA LIFE San Antonio | TX |
| Sea World Rescue Center | FL |
| The Florida Aquarium | FL |

AZA-FRTRP FRIENDS
The AZA-FRTRP has a strong support network that includes over 30 SAFE (Saving Animals from Extinction) [Coral Program](#) Partners . These collaborators contribute to working groups and provide financial and in-kind support to the rescue effort.



**A joint coral conservation collaboration made possible by SeaWorld Orlando, Disney Conservation, and the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida.*

Participation in the AZA- FRTRP is voluntary and the project is part the [AZA SAFE Coral Program](#).

In November 2025, the project began its seventh year continuing management of corals rescued from the FRT and beginning propagation and rearing of offspring from those corals to rebuild the reef.

How You Can Help the Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project:

The Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project is a network of facilities and supporters caring for nearly 2000 rescued Florida corals at the request of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Currently, funding to maintain holding space, build new space as corals grow in care, to train coral managers, and to provide resources to maintain the corals over time is critical to the project's success.

It's important to note:

- Since 2019, AZA member facilities have provided more than \$18 million US in resources and in kind services, to the rescue and long-term care of Florida corals. That is over 80% of the total investment in rescue to date.
- The care and support of a single Florida coral is estimated to cost approximately \$350US per year.
- An aquarium system suitable to house 32 Florida rescue corals can cost between \$7,000- \$10,000 US.



HOW TO HELP:

- 1) The AZA-FRTRP is grateful for financial support. Support can be directed to:

*AZA SAFE Coral Program / Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project
c/o Anne John
Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium
3701 S 10th Street
Omaha, NE 68107*

Many AZA facilities count on admission ticket sales and memberships to fund conservation projects like the AZA-FRTRP. You can help these valuable conservation projects by visiting your local AZA accredited zoo or aquarium or becoming a member to show your support.

AZA-FRTRP Project Key Messaging Themes:

- Corals and coral reefs are critical components of healthy oceans.
- The Florida Reef Tract (FRT) is in our backyard and is in the midst of an environmental crisis.
- The AZA-FRTRP is an effort of hope and empowerment:
 "We are helping Nature respond to crisis and RECOVER".
- In an unprecedented event, AZA professionals and resources have been sought in a nationwide effort to support State and Federal agencies to manage and respond to a coral rescue. Many of the coral species being removed from the FRT have never been placed in human care before. Some are listed as Endangered Species Act species. Coral biologists are

learning a great deal about these corals during the rescue operation that will help better manage the FRT in the future.

Resources and Additional Information:

[Association of Zoos and Aquariums' Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project](#) (*project web page*)

[AZA Coral Aquarist Program](#)

[AZA Network - AZA-FRTRP Communities](#) - Join the AZA-FRTRP open community on the AZA Network to receive the latest information on the Project and to network with others working to save the Florida Reef Tract. You do not have to be an AZA member or employed at an AZA facility to join the AZA Network- Just register! If you need assistance navigating the registration process, please contact the AZA-FRTRP Coordinator – bfirchau@aza.org

[AZA CONNECT magazine 2019](#)

[AZA CONNECT magazine 2020](#)

[AZA CONNECT magazine 2021](#)

[AZA SAFE: Saving Animals From Extinction](#)

[AZA SAFE Corals Conservation Plan 2024-2028](#)

[AZA SAFE Corals Communications Package](#)

Image Library:

An image library is available upon request. Contact Beth Firchau bfirchau@aza.org

Additional media resources are available for AZA-FRTRP members and those interested in sharing the story of the project. Please contact the project coordinator for details bfirchau@aza.org.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Florida Reef Tract (FRT)?

The FRT, also called Florida's Coral Reef, extends 360 miles from Port St. Lucie, Florida to Dry Tortugas National Park west of the Key West. The biodiverse area is a critical habitat for many marine animals and approximately 45 species of hard corals—seven of which are listed under the Endangered Species Act. It is the largest bank reef in the continental United States.

What is the difference between a bank reef and a barrier reef?

The Florida Reef Tract is a BANK REEF.

A bank reef and a barrier reef are two types reef formations. Unlike the barrier reef, a bank reef is closer to shore, is characterized by ocean ward spur and groove formations, and lack a landward shallow lagoon, characteristic of barrier reefs.

Why are corals along the Florida Reef Tract dying?

An unidentified pathogen causing stony coral tissue loss disease is rapidly progressing through the

Florida Reef Tract causing critical habitat loss.

When was the disease first observed? The disease was first observed in 2014 off the coast of Miami-Dade County.

Is the disease spreading? Yes, recent reports indicate the disease has reached the Dry Tortugas National Park and has now spread throughout the Caribbean.

How many species of coral could be impacted? More than 20 species of corals are susceptible to stony coral tissue loss disease (SCTLD), five of which are included on the Endangered Species List. Different species have varying rates of infection and mortality. Scientific monitoring has indicated that since 2014, some Florida coral species have sustained up to 90% reduction in abundance because of stony coral tissue loss disease. Mortality rate among affected corals is 66-100%.

Can the disease be prevented? There currently is no method of prevention. Advancements in understanding the disease and its processes are being made but more work is needed.

Why is rescue necessary?

Scientific monitoring indicated that since 2014, over half of the reef building corals found on the FRT have sustained up to 90% reduction in abundance because of stony coral tissue loss disease (SCTLD). As of spring 2021, the disease has progressed to the Dry Tortugas National Park in the southern-most reaches of the reef.

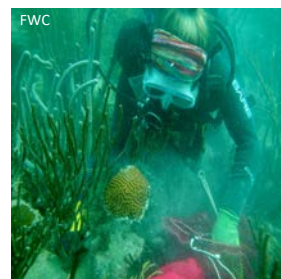
State resource managers felt that without some sort of safe keeping of disease susceptible coral species, the loss of these corals along the Florida Reef Tract would be eminent.

What are the goals of the rescue?

The goal of the rescue is two-fold: 1) to prevent localized extinction along the FRT for the most vulnerable species, and 2) to maintain as much genetic diversity as possible for over 20 priority species in preparation for restoration and possible future habitat disturbances.

From where are the Florida corals rescued?

Corals have been collected (rescued) by scientists from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission from reefs along the extent of the reef tract. Most corals are collected in water less than 60feet deep and within 10-20 miles off shore.



How did the rescue work?

Coral from the FRT have been hand removed from pre-selected reef sites by research teams from the State of Florida. The corals were transported by ship to temporary holding facilities in southeast Florida to be stabilized and acclimated to human care. From there, corals were shipped by air or over land in coolers filled with water to institutions all across the country.

Now that the corals are rescued, what is next?

The rescue was the first step towards restoration of the FRT. The next step already in action is the genetic identification of the rescued corals and developing a propagation plan to ensure optimum genetic diversity. Corals will be sexually

propagated and offspring produced will be reared in human care to a size and age that will allow for their successful reintroduction to the reef ecosystem.



Why are coral reefs in general important? Coral reefs protect coastal areas by buffering wave energy especially during storms and hurricanes. Additionally, coral reefs are critical components of productive oceans. They are home to a quarter of all marine species yet cover less than one tenth of the world's oceans. Their health and vulnerability to disease is impacted by warming ocean temperatures, point source and non-point source pollution, misuse of reef resources, etc.

What can we do to help coral reefs in general? Whether you live in a coastal community or inland, everyone can make choices that ensure the health of coral reefs by working to ensure the health of our waterways: lakes, rivers and oceans.

1. Decrease the use of single-use plastics
2. Clean up after your pets and dispose of waste responsibly
3. Encourage water conservation measures in your neighborhood

Additional Collaborative Communications Resources

These resources are provided by AZA-FRTRP partners and share the wider story of the disease, the collaborative response and future plans.

The Rs of Coral Rescue

Presented: Reef Futures 2021

Jennifer Moore (NOAA) and Lisa Gregg (FWC) co-authors

8 minute video

[The Rs of Coral Rescue](#)

Florida Department of Environmental Protection – communications products and websites

[Communications Resources Library](#)

[FDEP Florida's Coral Reefs](#)

[FDEP Stoney Coral Tissue Loss Disease Response](#)

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

[FWC Coral Rescue Dashboard](#)

[FWC Coral Rescue](#)

[AZA Coral Rescue](#) (FWC)

NOAA Coral Program / National Marine Sanctuaries

[CORIS Coral Reef Information System](#)

[Florida's Coral Reef Disease Outbreak](#)

Coral Reefs and Socioeconomic Impacts

[Socioeconomic Trends in South Florida Infographic \(2014-2019\)](#)

[All NCRMP South Florida infographics](#)

The NOAA Iconic Reefs Initiative

[Mission Iconic Reefs](#)

[Frequently Asked Questions: Mission Iconic Reefs](#)

Status of Caribbean Reefs

[AGRRA - Caribbean Disease Dashboard](#)

NOAA CORIS Gulf of Mexico Coral Reef Report Card

[Report Card Library](#)