

In Need of Rescue: Florida Coral Rescue Center Established to Help Save Florida Reefs

A diverse team of wildlife experts comes together to save corals in a unique public / private partnership, led by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums with involvement from Disney Conservation, the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, NOAA Fisheries, and SeaWorld.



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Orlando, FL (April 14, 2021) – A diverse group of coral reef management and conservation leaders has banded together to respond to an environmental crisis and save Florida’s coral reefs. The Orlando-based **Florida Coral Rescue Center (FCRC)** is a state-of-the-art facility established for gene banking and care of Florida corals rescued from reefs not yet affected by the **stony coral tissue loss disease (SCTLD)** sweeping across the Florida Reef Tract (Florida’s Coral Reef). As part of a national network of coral holding

or gene banking facilities coordinated by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), it is the largest facility of its kind in the U.S. and provides a safe, stable environment for coral colonies to receive world class care from a team of coral experts. It will play a significant role in the future of the Florida’s Coral Reef.

An unprecedented collaboration has emerged to create and support the center. Under the guidance of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA), the group consists of resource management agencies like Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and NOAA Fisheries, zoological facilities like SeaWorld and funding organizations like the Disney Conservation Fund, Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida, Bass Pro Shops, Cabela’s Outdoor Fund, World Wide Corals, Inc. and the Edith and Curtis Munson Foundation. These partners provide the funding, resources, and expertise to help ensure there is a future for Florida corals.

“AZA is proud of the incredible collaboration between our accredited zoo and aquarium members, like Disney and SeaWorld, their financial commitment, and their investment of time and talent to help save this natural treasure,” said Dan Ashe, President and CEO of AZA. “Being able to share our global network of animal care and welfare experts and our coral management expertise is inspiring. A monumental undertaking like this is another demonstration of why zoos and aquariums are so vital to conservation. The coordinated, multi-facility AZA-Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project and the Florida Coral Rescue Center show that, together, we can make a difference for Florida’s reefs for future generations to share.”

“This unified effort between public aquariums, government agencies, researchers and universities, is incredible,” reflects Jim Kinsler, SeaWorld aquarium curator and FCRC facility manager. “Experts from around the United States are collaborating together to save the corals on Florida’s Coral Reef to support their survival in the future. The Florida Coral Rescue Center is a product of these vital partnerships and we couldn’t do the work we’re doing without our combined resources and expertise.”

Corals Cannot Physically Distance

For the past year, the nation’s focus has been on the disruption, disconnection and challenges caused by COVID-19. The global COVID-19 pandemic response, including our physical distancing to curb the spread of the disease, is a stark reminder of how interconnected we are with each other.

Like the response to COVID-19, combatting new diseases is also a challenge in animal conservation. But unlike our approach to mitigating the spread of COVID-19 in humans, corals cannot physically distance. Rescuing corals from ahead

of the SCTLD disease progression was an attempt to keep corals from getting sick and safeguard them for future reef restoration efforts.

Groundbreaking Coral Science Ensuring Optimum Care and Welfare

Often in an emergency, there is little time to explore how best to do something. Many of Florida's coral species had never been managed in human care before and little was known about their needs. Decades of experience caring for Indo-Pacific and non-rescue Atlantic corals provided aquarists with a strong foundation.

Over the last year, FCRC coral aquarists have joined colleagues caring for rescued corals across the country, advancing coral science, developing new coral care techniques, and ensuring optimum coral welfare. In some cases, they are observing behaviors that researchers and field biologists have never observed before. Making every effort to meet the needs of each coral, aquarists go the extra mile every day, including feeding corals in the dark when they prefer eating with the lights out.

A Different Mating Game

Rescuing corals is only the first step. Ultimately, many corals will be needed for restoration efforts, requiring the rescued corals to reproduce and produce offspring. Since many of the rescue coral species have never been held in human care before, aquarists have had a lot to learn about feeding, correct lighting, and proper water flow. And apparently, they are doing a great job. The corals have begun to reproduce!

Corals can reproduce sexually and asexually. Sexual reproduction provides the most genetic diversity among offspring due to the mixing of egg and sperm genetic material from the parents. Sexually reproduced corals are unique individuals while offspring produced by asexual reproduction are identical to the parent. Over the last year, FCRC corals have taken a huge step forward on their own and have been reproducing asexually, producing "gemmae" offspring.

Gemmae are identical to their parent. While not the optimum candidate for restoration in larger numbers, these coral clones ensure the genetic contribution of their rescued parents will continue to be part of Florida's Coral Reef. Reproduction is a positive sign that the corals in the care of the FCRC are getting all that they need to not just survive but thrive.

The Personal FCRC Experience

Bringing hope to Florida's Coral Reef and the corals that build the reef tract takes a community. The story of rescuing corals and the Florida Coral Rescue Center is a personal one for everyone involved.

It Takes a Colony

"This is not something that one person, one team or one organization can do alone. Collaboration, working without silos, exchanging ideas and combining resources for the future of our reefs is what coral rescue and the FCRC is all about. Corals have been getting it right for millions of years. Working together- working as a colony, we can do great things." – Beth Firchau - AZA, Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project Coordinator

Honored to Work for Corals

"The effort to reverse the collapse of an entire ecosystem isn't something that can be done without the herculean efforts of many people with a diversity of talents and resources. I consider it a privilege to play even a small part in this huge effort." – Dr. Andy Stamper – Disney, Conservation Science Manager

A Model for Other Conservation Challenges

"The Foundation was thrilled to help get the 'lights turned on' at the FCRC (or off, as the corals prefer)! We are honored to be a part of a team that's working to preserve a treasured Florida ecosystem for generations to come. And it takes all of us, from the coral biologists to the accountants paying the bills. We're hopeful this partnership of state agencies, companies and nonprofit organizations can serve as a model to tackle other

significant environmental challenges as they arise.” -Andrew Walker - Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida, President & CEO

Hope for the Future

“FCRC represents hope for the future of Florida’s Coral Reef. To be able to save thousands of corals from disease so that restoration practitioners can be provided with the necessary stock to produce and re-populate the reef tract with new generations of genetically diverse corals is every conservation manager’s dream. Florida owes a great debt to AZA, the FCRC, and all of the gene banking facilities nationwide for taking on this significant challenge and knocking it out of the park.” -Lisa Gregg – FWC, Florida Coral Rescue Team Co-Lead

Corals and their Place in Ocean Communities

“Most people see corals as the background for fish in a habitat. For me, I started in reef keeping as a hobby as a teenager because of my love for fish. As I immersed myself in the care of corals and learned of their biological needs, I soon felt very differently. As a professional aquarist working on this project, I have met people who feel the exact same way. We all see just how amazing and important these corals are. It is incredibly encouraging when working in such a crisis. I love being a part of a conservation project that is much bigger than myself. In this project the corals are individualized and important. Each colony we have is priceless and will serve as building blocks for Florida reefs.” -Erik Ostertag - SeaWorld, FCRC Aquarist

Collaborating for Coral Conservation

“Working at the Florida Coral Rescue Center has been an extremely rewarding experience because it has allowed me to contribute to something that is larger than myself. Collaborating with other aquarists from around the country to execute a common goal is an experience like no other. We all care a tremendous amount about our mission and are able to come together to share our experiences, listen, and learn from each other for the sole purpose of saving these animals and all of the life that the corals foster. The work that we are doing is unprecedented in terms of magnitude and novelty. At the Center, we are caring for hundreds of corals, representing 19 species, that have little to no history in human care. This project is a unique challenge and we’re having a profound impact on the future of Florida coral reefs.” - Aaron Gavin - SeaWorld, FCRC Aquarist

Thriving Corals: A Good Problem to Have

“One of the most rewarding parts about working on this project at the FCRC is being able to see the incredible amount of growth these corals have had in the last 10 months that they have been here. When collected, each coral is mounted on a terracotta tile that serves as a stable base or anchor for the coral in the aquarium. The corals brought here in March 2020 are doing so well they need to be given larger tile bases. To see the Endangered Species Act list corals like the star corals is wonderful.” -Sara Urbanski - SeaWorld, FCRC Aquarist

An Unexpected Bundle of Joy

“Having the cactus corals (*Mycetophyllia* sp.) produce larvae was exciting. Their survival in the ocean is naturally challenging and, now with SCTL, they have it even tougher. Caring for them and getting to watch them grow has shown me exactly how tough these little guys are.” -Jelani Reynolds - SeaWorld, FCRC Aquarist

About the Association of Zoos and Aquariums

Founded in 1924, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, animal welfare, education, science, and recreation. AZA is the accrediting body for the top zoos and aquariums in the United States and 11 other countries. Look for the AZA accreditation logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things. The AZA is a leader in saving species and your link to helping animals all over the world. To learn more, visit www.aza.org.

About Disney Conservation

Disney Conservation is committed to saving wildlife and building a global community inspired to protect the magic of nature together. Since 1995, the Disney Conservation Fund has directed \$100 million to support nonprofit organizations working with communities to save wildlife, inspire action and protect the planet. Disney Conservation Team Wildlife leads best-in-class scientific programs to conserve wildlife in Disney's backyard and beyond, connects people to build a network for nature, and cares for the planet through everyday actions. To learn more, visit www.disney.com/conservation or follow @DisneyConservation.

About the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida

The Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and other public and private partners to conserve Florida's native animals and plants and the lands and waters they need to survive. Since its founding in 1994, the Foundation has raised and donated nearly \$50 million to conservation and outdoor recreation and education. To learn more, visit www.wildlifeflorida.org.

About the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

FWC's mission is managing fish and wildlife resources for their long-term well-being and the benefit of people. To learn more, visit www.MyFWC.com.

About NOAA

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. To learn more, visit www.noaa.gov

About SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment™

SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment™ is a leading theme park and entertainment company providing experiences that matter and inspiring guests to protect animals and the wild wonders of the world. SeaWorld is one of the world's foremost zoological organizations and a global leader in animal husbandry, behavioral management, veterinary care and animal welfare. The company also rescues and rehabilitates marine and terrestrial animals that are ill, injured, orphaned or abandoned, with the goal of returning them to the wild. The SeaWorld® and Busch Gardens® rescue teams have helped more than 38,000 animals in need over the last 55 years.



PARTNER QUOTES

Disney Conservation

“With the Florida coastline as home to Disney Cruise Line and part of our backyard, we know keeping coral reefs healthy is essential to the vitality of our coastline and underwater ecosystems,” said Dr. Mark Penning, Vice President of Disney’s Animals Science and Environment. “Disney has long been a leader in coral conservation work worldwide, particularly through our ongoing efforts in The Bahamas, and we are proud to support efforts to rescue and protect Florida’s coral reefs and work with others who share our passion so we can save nature together and make a difference.”

Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida

“We are committed to rescuing irreplaceable corals and restoring Florida’s reefs,” said Foundation President & CEO Andrew Walker. “It will take many years to restore Florida’s Coral Reef, but the effort being made gives us great hope that it will remain a vital part of the state for generations to come. The partnership for this rescue center is a key step.”

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

“Leveraging our partnerships continues to be the key to productive conservation efforts,” said Rodney Barreto, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Chairman. “With innovative approaches and teamwork from public-private partnerships such as the Florida Coral Rescue Team and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, protecting and restoring the Florida Reef Tract can be done - and must be done - for the benefit of our environment, economy and quality of life.”

SeaWorld

“We are incredibly proud to be involved in such a unique project with expert partners who are all committed to a shared goal – returning healthy corals back to the Florida Keys,” said Dr. Christopher Dold, Chief Zoological Officer, SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment. “With decades of experience in coral husbandry, managing coral capacity, and developing best practices along with other aquariums and conservation groups in the delicate care of coral, our dedicated team of aquarists are continuing this important work by managing the Florida Coral Rescue Center and assisting in these at-risk coral species receiving the critical attention they deserve.”



CORALS OF THE FCRC

<u>Code</u>	<u>Scientific Name</u>	<u>Common Name</u>
ALAM	<i>Agaricia lamarcki</i>	Plate/Saucer Coral
CNAT	<i>Colpophyllia natans</i>	Boulder Brain Coral
DSTO	<i>Dichocoenia stokesii</i>	Elliptical Star Coral
DLAB	<i>Diploria labyrinthiformis</i>	Grooved Brain Coral
EFAS	<i>Eusmilia fastigiata</i>	Smooth Flower Coral
MAUR	<i>Madracis auretenra</i>	Yellow Finger/Pencil Coral
MMEA	<i>Meandrina meandrites</i>	Maze Coral
MCAV	<i>Montastraea cavernosa</i>	Great Star Coral
MANG	<i>Mussa angulosa</i>	Large Flower Coral
MALI	<i>Mycetophyllia aliciae</i>	Knobby Cactus Coral
MFER	<i>Mycetophyllia ferox</i>	Rough Cactus Coral
MLAM	<i>Mycetophyllia lamarckiana</i>	Ridged Cactus Coral
OANN	<i>Orbicella annularis</i>	Boulder Star Coral
OFAV	<i>Orbicella faveolata</i>	Mountainous Star Coral
OFRA	<i>Orbicella franksi</i>	Boulder Star Coral
PCLI	<i>Pseudodiploria clivosa</i>	Knobby Brain Coral
PSTR	<i>Pseudodiploria strigose</i>	Symmetrical Brain Coral
SBOU	<i>Solenastrea bournoni</i>	Smooth Star Coral

Florida Coral Rescue Center Square Footage – 2058 sq ft

Number of Corals to be Housed at the Center

753 corals

Holding System Surface Area – area devoted specifically to coral holding

Total – 620 sq ft

Number of Coral Aquariums

18 aquariums

Staffing

2 Full Time (40 hours/ week)

2 Part Time (28 hours/ week)

Total - 136 hours per week

Total Number of Gallons Devoted to Coral Care

5800 gallons



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Coral Reefs Overview

NOAA

https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/education/kits/corals/coral07_importance.html

CARMABI Research Station

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kb0bz-3IWc>

Coral Reefs as Coastal Protection

NOAA

https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/coral_protect.html

The AZA-Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project

AZA

<https://www.aza.org/connect-june-2019>

<https://www.aza.org/connect-stories/stories/all-hands-on-deck>

<https://www.aza.org/connect-stories/stories/saving-corals-together>

<https://www.aza.org/connect-stories/stories/collaborating-to-save-the-florida-reef-tract>

Image and Video Assets*

Assets can be viewed [here](#).

**Some the photographs and videos provided as part of this package were created in March 2020 prior to current accepted COVID-19 physical distancing and mask etiquette practices.*



SOCIAL MEDIA

Join the FCRC partners posting about this extraordinary facility and the partners that have made it possible. Everyone is invited to use the video and image assets provided in this toolkit and the social media post-copy suggestions listed below.

Relevant social tags: **#AZAcoralrescue**

AZA

Facebook: @ZoosAquariums Twitter and Instagram: @Zoos_Aquariums

Disney Conservation

Facebook: @DisneyConservation @DisneyASE @Disney Cruise Line

Instagram: @DisneyConservation @DrMarkatDisney @DisneyCruiseLine

Twitter: @DisneyConserves @DisneyCruise

Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida

Twitter: @wildlife_fl Facebook: @wildlifeflorida

Instagram: @wildlife.florida

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram: @myFWC

Sea World

@seaworld

NOAA:

Twitter: @NOAAFish_SERO @NOAAFisheries @NOAACoral

Instagram: @NOAAFisheries

[Video for Social Media](#). *

**Some the photographs and videos provided as part of this package were created in March 2020 prior to current accepted COVID-19 physical distancing and mask etiquette practices.*

Social Media Content

Coral reef experts and conservation leaders, including SeaWorld and the Disney Conservation Fund, joined forces to establish the Florida Coral Rescue Center to help save Florida's coral reefs from stony coral tissue loss disease. A part of AZA's Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project, the Florida Coral Rescue Center is the largest U.S. facility, established for gene banking and care of over 700 rescued corals. [news release](#)

Twitter: Coral experts & conservation leaders joined forces to establish the Florida Coral Rescue Center to help save Florida's coral reefs from disease. The FCRC is the largest U.S. facility, established for gene banking and care of over 700 rescued corals. [news release](#)