

Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition

Testimony of Ray Judah
Coordinator-Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition
Before the House Committee on Natural Resources and
the House Committee on Small Business
“Joint Oversight Hearing”

August 6, 2015

Chairman Bishop, Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Grijalva, Ranking Member Velazquez, and members of the committees – thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony for the hearing titled, “Restricted Access at Biscayne National Park and Implications for Fishermen, Small Businesses, the Local Economy and Environment.”

The Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition work together to curb unwise coastal development, protect coastal and marine habitats, implement and enforce coastal and ocean pollution laws, protect marine ecosystems, ensure robust and plentiful fisheries and marine resources, reduce global warming pollution, and strengthen coastal and ocean governance in Florida.

Members of The Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition, including The Conservancy of Southwest Florida, The Sea Turtle Conservancy, Surfrider Foundation and 1000 Friends of Florida wish to express our strong support for the creation of a marine reserve in Biscayne National Park to protect the park’s incredible but severely threatened coral reef ecosystem.

Located in the backyard of the city of Miami, Biscayne National Park is a national treasure, home to one of the largest barrier reefs in the world and the only living coral reef in the continental United States. It is one of our country’s largest marine national parks and offers visitors the opportunity to explore a unique underwater world that they might never otherwise be able to discover.

Biscayne National Park was created to protect “a rare combination of terrestrial, marine, and amphibious life in a tropical setting of great natural beauty” for present

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and future generations. In addition to its great ecological value, the park is a significant economic generator, supporting a variety of economic and recreational activities, including diving, snorkeling, boating, and fishing. According to the National Park Service, over half a million visitors to Biscayne National Park in 2014 spent more than \$32 million and sustained 459 jobs in the local area.

Unfortunately, Biscayne's resources have rapidly deteriorated in health over the last few decades and scientists warn that some species populations within the park indicate "imminent resource collapse." Immediate action needs to be taken to ensure the long-term health of Biscayne National Park and to guarantee that the local economy does not suffer from an absence of healthy fisheries and coral reefs.

Marine reserves are one of the quickest and most effective science-based solutions for conserving the future health and sustainability of Biscayne's coral reef ecosystem. Creating a marine reserve in Biscayne National Park would help to improve the health of the park's coral reefs, and increase fish size, diversity and abundance. Marine reserves implemented at Dry Tortugas National Park and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary have shown substantial benefits in the protection and restoration of degraded resources.

Studies have documented increases in the size and abundance of once over-exploited species within the reserve areas and spillover of more and larger fish outside of reserve boundaries. Furthermore, an economic study prepared by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration indicated that no financial losses were reported by recreational or commercial fishers in the area and commercial catches of reef fish actually increased in the region. Similar protections are urgently needed to protect the threatened resources of Biscayne National Park.

The National Park Service is legally required to protect the resources of our spectacular system of national parks unimpaired for the enjoyment of present and future generations. Their decision to create a marine reserve in Biscayne National Park is critical to preventing impairment of Biscayne's resources. The marine reserve does not unreasonably restrict access to the park as visitors to Biscayne will still be able to fish recreationally in the majority of park waters and boating, swimming, and diving are permitted within reserve boundaries.

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Therefore, we strongly support the creation of a marine reserve to protect Biscayne National Park's treasured system of threatened reef fisheries and coral reef ecosystems.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony.

Sincerely,



Ray Judah - Coordinator Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition

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