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August, 2, 2015

The Honorable Rob Bishop
Committee on Natural Resources Chairman
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Steve Chabot
Committee on Small Business Chairman
2361 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: Joint Oversight Hearing on “Restricted Access at Biscayne National Park and Implications for Fishermen, Small Businesses, the Local Economy and Environment”

Dear Chairman Bishop and Chairman Chabot:

The Nature Conservancy’s objective review of relevant scientific information, coupled with our understanding of the National Park Service’s mission and Biscayne National Park’s (BNP’s) site-specific management objectives, led us to go on the record in 2009 in support of marine reserves as an effective approach for improving the Park’s degraded fish and coral populations. Since that time we have been participating in BNP’s General Management Plan (GMP) and Fisheries Management Plan development processes. We believe the marine reserve described in the GMP’s Preferred Alternative provides a greater likelihood of recovery of the park’s degraded natural resources than any other management approach available to the National Park Service.

The Nature Conservancy has been working in South Florida since 1971 and we currently work on BNP’s and surrounding jurisdictions’ coral reefs, conducting scientific assessments of coral condition and improving reef condition through active coral restoration. Our staff scientists’ direct observations support the ample empirical evidence that coral reef habitat conditions and many fish populations in BNP have declined over the years.

BNP’s coral reefs are part of the Florida Reef Tract which experienced a 37% decline in live coral cover in just five years according to a 2002 report by NOAA Fisheries. Population sizes of 70% of the 40+ species in the snapper-grouper complex of fishes in BNP are currently less than the minimum 30% spawning potential ratio required by state, federal and international standards for fishery sustainability. Some of these fish populations are less than 1% of their historical abundance (Ault et al. 1997, 1998, 2005b, 2009, 2014).

The Nature Conservancy's science-based expectation is that the establishment of the marine reserve in BNP will work hand-in-hand with park-wide and state-wide management approaches to improve the condition of the habitat and fish populations within and beyond the boundaries of the reserve. One needs to look no further than the adjacent Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and nearby Dry Tortugas National Park.

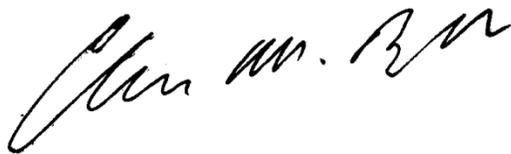
Released in 2013, "An Integrated Biogeographic Assessment of Reef Fish Populations and Fisheries in Dry Tortugas: Effects of No-take Reserves," evaluated the 151-square nautical mile Tortugas Ecological Reserve's effects on living marine resources of the region and the people whose livelihoods depend on them. The report's analysis of long-term socioeconomic and scientific information found that after the ecological reserve was designated in 2001:

- Overfished species such as black and red grouper, yellowtail and mutton snapper increased in presence, abundance and size inside the reserve and throughout the region;
- Annual gatherings of spawning mutton snapper, once thought to be wiped out from overfishing, began to reform inside the Reserve;
- Commercial catches of reef fish in the region increased, and continue to do so; and
- No financial losses were experienced by regional commercial or recreational fishers;

In fact, fisheries surrounding the Sanctuary and Dry Tortugas National Park marine reserves are thriving by comparison to pre-reserve conditions and by comparison to those in BNP. The Nature Conservancy is not aware of any comparable track record of success for the other management options examined by the National Park Service for BNP.

Thank you for considering The Nature Conservancy's input on this matter.

Sincerely,



Chris Bergh
South Florida Conservation Director

CC: The Honorable Carlos Curbelo
The Honorable Mario Diaz-Balart
The Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen