

NATURAL WONDERS

Florida's Tortugas Becomes Nation's Largest Marine Reserve

(NAPSA)—A remote area known as Tortugas, 80 miles west of Key West, Florida, has been designated the nation's largest marine reserve. This will preserve the healthiest coral in the region and the richness of species and health of fish stock in the Tortugas and throughout the Florida Keys. The achievement adds the spectacular 151-square nautical mile Tortugas Ecological Reserve to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

The reserve's coral reef, hard-bottom, and seagrass communities are bathed by the clearest and cleanest waters in the Florida Keys archipelago, due in part to the strong influence of the Florida Current or Gulf Stream. At some point, the waters of the entire Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico pass by the doorstep of the Tortugas, delivering a phenomenally rich array of organisms from a huge area of the Caribbean basin.

The region's characteristics are ecologically unique. "The Tortugas Ecological Reserve is a shining example of what can happen when diverse interests come together to accomplish a common goal—in this case, the preservation of a spectacular ocean environment in the Florida Keys," said Commerce Secretary Donald L. Evans.

The ecological reserve, which consists of two areas—Tortugas North and Tortugas South—now fully protects all marine life, including fish, coral, shrimp and



CLEAR WATER—A unique pocket of coral reefs in the Tortugas is now preserved as the nation's largest marine reserve.

lobster. Tortugas North remains open to diving, and the sanctuary has installed mooring buoys to protect the fragile coral reefs from anchor damage. Tortugas South is open only to vessels in transit and to researchers and educators holding a sanctuary permit. Sanctuary boundaries now encompass the coral reef areas Sherwood Forest and Riley's Hump, permitting the sanctuary to address anchor damage and water pollution from vessel discharges in these sensitive areas.

The waters immediately surrounding most of the 1,700 islands that make up the Florida Keys have been designated as a national marine sanctuary since 1990. The sanctuary extends from the southern tip of Key Biscayne,

south of Miami, to the west reaches of the Tortugas. Authorized by Congress, the sanctuary was established to stem the mounting threats to the health and ecological future of the coral reef ecosystem.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary is part of the NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary System, a network of 13 protected areas that encompass marine and freshwater resources from Washington to the Florida Keys, and from Lake Huron to the Gulf of Mexico, American Samoa and places in between.

To learn more about our nation's marine sanctuaries, visit the NOAA Web site at www.sanctuaries.nos.noaa.gov.