

# Save coral reefs for future generations

By STEPHANIE MEEKS, CARTER ROBERTS and PETER SELIGMANN

Coral reefs are more than just aesthetic pleasures. Home to a rich diversity of marine life, these ocean habitats are central to the economies of many developing nations and to the livelihoods of coastal communities around the world. Realizing the value of this aquatic currency, representatives of 17 countries and 30 organizations met in Washington, D.C., on Thursday to officially launch 2008 as the "International Year of the Reef." Yet this celebratory label may come too soon, because at the current pace of global warming the great majority of our planet's tropical reefs will virtually disappear during the next 50 years.

Overfishing, pollution and reef destruction have been diminishing the health and viability of the world's corals for decades, and the increase in ocean temperatures can destroy huge areas of coral reefs through bleaching -- a stress response that causes a coral to lose its colorful and symbiotic algae. At the same time, rising levels of carbon dioxide create greater ocean acidity, which could prevent coral reefs from forming and growing.

The return on investment in coral reef conservation is unparalleled, but so is the detriment that would result from the disappearance of these ecosystems. Covering just 1 percent of the planet, coral reefs support over one million species and provide services essential to human-well being - nutrition, enhanced protection from storms and tourism revenue.

One in six people worldwide depends on fish as their primary source of protein, but with every 5 percent loss of coral reefs up to 500,000 tons of fish are lost. Coral reefs also generate \$375 billion per year in goods and services, more than \$4 billion of which comes from Florida, where bleaching, disease, over-fishing and declining water quality have caused a more than 90 percent decline in the populations of magnificent staghorn coral that attract so many tourists to the state each year.

The good news is that with increased international investments in the protection and restoration of coral reefs, we can stop their devaluation right now. Scientists and conservationists are discovering and applying new ways to help coral reefs resist and recover from bleaching. We know how to make fishing more sustainable while still providing food and jobs. Recent studies show that marine protected areas can protect coral reef ecosystems and produce benefits for people, many of them in poor coastal communities around the globe.

The three largest conservation organizations worldwide -- The Nature Conservancy, Conservation International and World Wildlife Fund -- recently doubled our financial investments in marine conservation, believing the value of such capital will only increase. We are also committed to slowing the pace of global warming through on-the-ground conservation projects, education and policy initiatives, and we realize that any legislation aimed at reducing carbon emissions will also benefit the health of the world's coral reefs. Yet despite our commitment to work together for the protection of coral reefs, our efforts will not succeed without increased funding and support for coral reef protection from the U.S. government.

There are a number of opportunities that deserve action now.

- **Congress** should pass and the president should sign the reauthorized Coral Reef Conservation Act and ensure that it is adequately funded to guarantee the continuation of proven coral reef conservation programs and activities and meet the goals of our National Coral Reef Action Strategy.

- **Priority** should also be given to the expansion of "Debt for Nature Swaps" under the Tropical Forest Conservation Act to allow financing for coral protection.

- **Increased** financial and technical support is also needed to assist U.S. states, territories and other coastal nations involved in coral reef restoration and research, to expand programs at a range of federal agencies including NOAA and the Department of Interior and to provide U.S. scientific and managerial expertise to developing countries committed to conserving coral reefs.

We are inspired by the leadership of President Tommy E. Remengesau Jr. of Palau, who sparked the "Micronesia Challenge" to protect 20 percent and 30 percent of the region's oceans and forests, respectively, by 2020. And we are motivated by government officials attending the Climate Change Conference in Bali in December. They launched the "Coral Triangle Initiative" to safeguard the world's richest coral reef ecosystems in the waters of Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and neighboring island nations.

As the presidential candidates on both sides discuss a growing American desire for change and inspiration, we ask the current U.S. government to follow in the footsteps of these global leaders and to invest in these tangible opportunities that will grant future generations the chance to experience the wonder, beauty and plenty of coral reefs -- the ocean's greatest assets.

*Stephanie Meeks is acting president and CEO of The Nature Conservancy; Carter Roberts is president of World Wildlife Fund; and Peter Seligmann is chairman and CEO of Conservation International.*