FLOWER GARDEN BANKS

The Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (FGBNMS) consists of three geographically separate underwater features – the East and West Flower Garden Banks, and Stetson Bank (Figure FGB-1). The Sanctuary is located approximately 100 miles south of the Texas-Louisiana border in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico and contains some of the northernmost coral reefs on the continental shelf of North America. The coral reefs of the

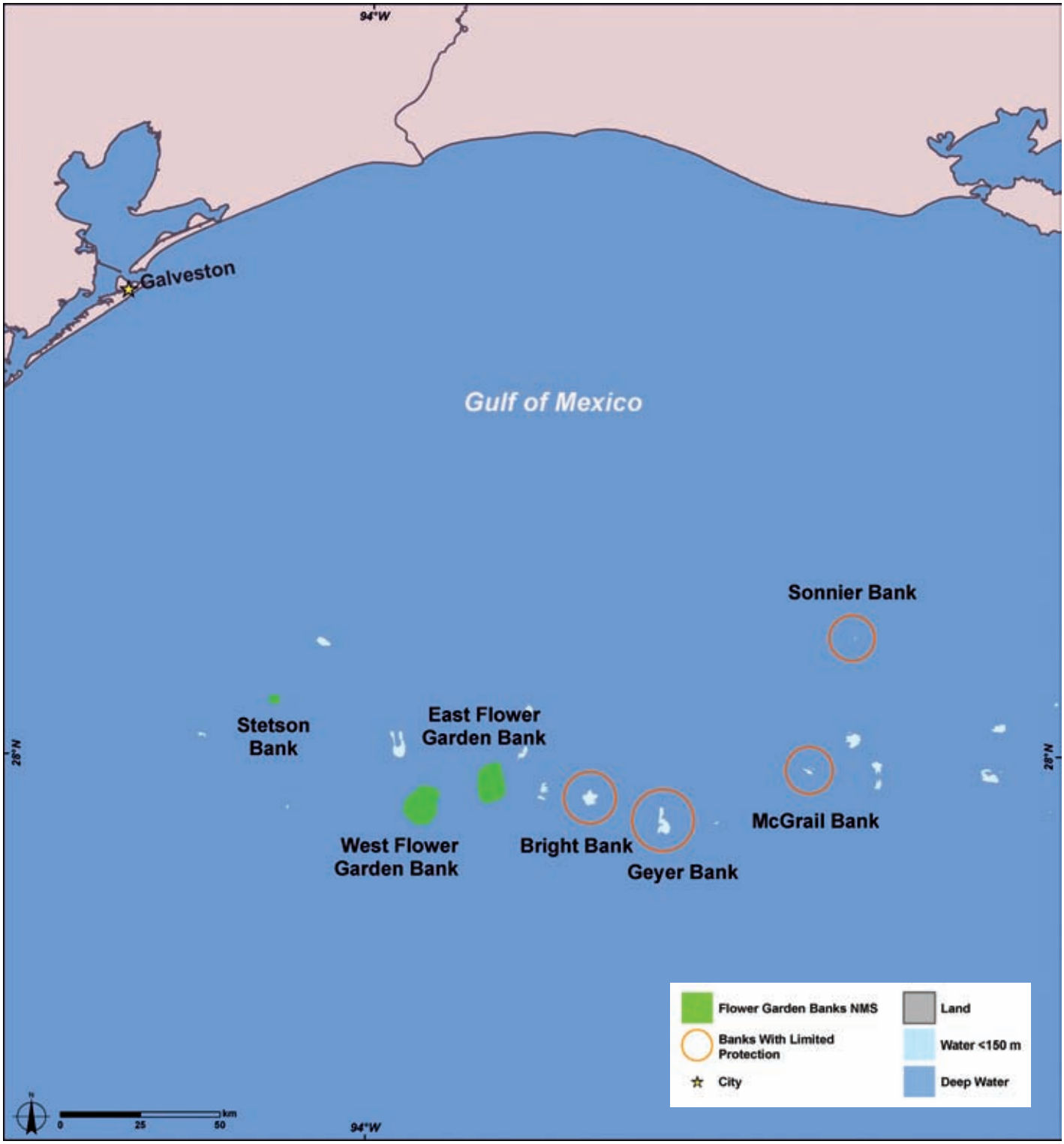

Figure FGB-1. Map showing the locations of the coral banks of the Gulf of Mexico. While some of the banks are protected by the provisions of the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, unprotected coral communities are present at Bright, Sonnier, Geyer, and McGrail Banks. These banks are part of the network of reefs and banks which are biologically and ecologically associated with the ecosystems of the sanctuary. Map: A. Shapiro. Source: Hickerson and Schmahl (2005).

East and West Flower Garden Banks are presently in good condition, compared to most other reef systems of the Caribbean and western Atlantic. Over 20 years of long-term coral reef monitoring at the East and West Flower Garden Banks indicates that the reefs have maintained approximately 50 to 70% coral coverage within the coral zone - an extraordinary coverage in a global climate of coral reef decline. The reefs are dominated by extremely large boulder corals (*Montastraea* spp., *Diploria strigosa*, and *Colpophyllia natans*). Branching corals are dominated by *Madracis mirabilis* fields in the deeper portions of the reefs. The coral cap ranges in depths from 17 to 49 m and covers an area of approximately 0.55 square miles (350 acres). Fish populations appear to be in good condition, although scuba divers encounter fishing debris and bycatch on a regular basis. This reef system appears to be thriving in spite of the fact that the FGBNMS is located in the middle of one of the most productive oil and gas fields in the world. Stetson Bank is a colorful, geologically exciting feature, dominated by sponges, several species of corals, and algae.

In addition to the FGBNMS, there are dozens of other reefs and banks in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico. The three banks within the Sanctuary are accessible to recreational scuba divers (within 130 ft depth), whereas the other reefs and banks are generally deeper. Coral reef communities are thriving on several of the other northwestern Gulf of Mexico features, including but not limited to McGrail Bank, Sonnier Bank, and Bright Bank. Evidence suggests that the coral reef communities of McGrail, Sonnier, and Bright Banks are biologically and ecologically linked to those found in the FGBNMS. These coral communities have historically been unprotected from threats other than those related to the oil and gas industry.

Due to the remote location of the banks, limited recreational activities occur (e.g., approximately 3,000 scuba divers per year visit FGBNMS). Hook and line fishing, both recreational and commercial, is allowed at the FGBNMS. However, the level of fishing pressure is not known, mainly due to the logistics of monitoring this activity at the site, and due to the manner in which commercial data is collected and managed.

The Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council recently identified 13 reefs and banks in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico as HAPCs. While HAPC designation does not offer regulatory protections, a number of measures to regulate fishing gears and protect sensitive habitats were identified for these areas within specific fishery management plans. This includes prohibitions on bottom anchoring in coral reef areas; and prohibitions on trawling gear, bottom longlines, buoy gear, and fish traps in some areas.

Research Needs

FLOWER GARDEN BANKS	**FISHING**
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Conserve and manage fisheries to prevent overfishing, rebuild stocks, and minimize destructive fishing. *See Jurisdiction-Wide Section for additional research needs.*	Assess the status and trends of fish populations within FGBNMS and on other banks in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico.
	Assess temporal dynamics of coral reef fish trophic structure, including interactions with varying levels of fishing and other stresses.
	Assess larval fish dynamics in and around the FGBNMS.

FLOWER GARDEN BANKS	POLLUTION
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Reduce the impacts of pollutants on coral reef ecosystems by improving the understanding of their effects. *See Jurisdiction-Wide Section for additional research needs.*	Determine the sources, types, concentrations, and effects of pollutants on important coral reef species in the FGBNMS.
	Model the water circulation patterns of the northern Gulf of Mexico.
	Assess the potential impacts of oil and gas exploration and production on neighboring related coral reef communities.
	Assess the levels of toxins in commercially fished species within the FGBNMS.
	Assess the level of landborne and industry generated pollutants, including nutrients and hydrocarbon-associated contaminants in coral reef environments and in indicator organisms.

FLOWER GARDEN BANKS	COASTAL USES
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Reduce the impacts from recreational use, industry, development, and maritime vessels on coral reef ecosystems. *See Jurisdiction-Wide Section for additional research needs.*	Determine the annual number of violations of Sanctuary "no-anchoring" regulations by both commercial and recreational vessels, and evaluate their impact on the resource.
	Compare current bathymetric data to historical seismic and multibeam data to assess possible changes in bank topography due to natural processes or industry impacts.
	Evaluate the location and placement of artificial reefs proposed by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Artificial Reef Program.
Balance resource use to minimize user conflicts, provide equitable uses, and ensure optimal benefits to present and future generations.	Assess the level of demand for recreational diving from commercial diving operators and private recreational boats, and the impacts of recreational diving on coral reef resources.
	Determine the effectiveness of mooring buoys in reducing physical impacts to coral reef resources.
Restore injured and degraded coral reef habitats. *See Jurisdiction-Wide Section for additional research needs.*	Determine the feasibility of deep water coral restoration.
Evaluate and improve the effectiveness of MPAs as a management tool.	*See Jurisdiction-Wide Section for research needs.*

FLOWER GARDEN BANKS	COASTAL USES
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Manage coral reef ecosystems and their uses in a holistic manner. *See Jurisdiction-Wide Section for additional research needs.*	Determine the level of vulnerability and exploitation of coral reef resources that are currently unprotected using deepwater survey techniques.

FLOWER GARDEN BANKS	INVASIVE SPECIES
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Control or eradicate invasive species that have the potential to cause damage to coral reef ecosystems. *See Jurisdiction-Wide Section for additional research needs.*	Identify and remove introduced species from natural coral reef areas (e.g., *Tubastrea coccinea*).
	Investigate growth rates and reproductive potential of identified invasive species on artificial structures and nearby natural hard bottom features.
	Determine whether nearby oil and gas platforms serve as "stepping stones" for the introduction of invasive species.

FLOWER GARDEN BANKS	CLIMATE CHANGE
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Minimize the effects of climate change on coral reef ecosystems. *See Jurisdiction-Wide Section for additional research needs.*	Characterize bleaching events (including the extent, impact, and causes) on deeper reef communities in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico, and identify factors that affect recovery/mortality.

FLOWER GARDEN BANKS	EXTREME EVENTS
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Identify causes and consequences of diseases in coral reef ecosystems and mitigate their impacts. *See Jurisdiction-Wide Section for additional research needs*	Characterize the types of diseases and other direct sources of coral mortality (e.g., damselfish and parrotfish predation) on deeper reef communities in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico, including their impacts and relationships with known stressors.

Jurisdiction-Wide Research Needs

Broad overarching research needs that apply to all jurisdictions (except where noted) are based on the discussion in Part I of this Plan and are presented below. Research needs that are specific to a jurisdiction are detailed under the sections entitled *Jurisdiction-Specific Research Needs*.

RESEARCH SUPPORTING MANAGEMENT

Fishing

ALL JURISDICTIONS	FISHING
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Conserve and manage fisheries to prevent overfishing, rebuild stocks, and minimize destructive fishing.	Determine the population status of managed reef species using fishery dependent and independent programs.
	Determine the level of fishing pressure and the distribution of effort for subsistence, recreational, and commercial fisheries, and the impact of these activities on fisheries resources and coral reef habitats.
	Determine the effects of habitat degradation and loss of coral on fish community structure and stability.
	Determine the effects of various fisheries (gear and techniques) on coral reef ecosystems, including physical impacts on habitat, trophic effects, and incidental catch; and identify alternatives to minimize impacts.
	Determine the effectiveness of fishery management actions, including size limits and seasonal closures.
	Determine the current status and locations of reef fish spawning aggregations.
	Characterize fish movements and habitat utilization patterns of different life stages to assist in the identification of essential fish habitat.
	Characterize the life histories of important fish species and their movement patterns within and among different habitats.
	Characterize recruitment patterns for commercially and ecologically important species.
	Quantify fish community structure including size, diversity, and abundance among reefs and across multiple habitat types.

Pollution

ALL JURISDICTIONS	POLLUTION
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Reduce the impacts of pollutants on coral reef ecosystems by improving the understanding of their effects.	Ascertain pollutant loads, their primary sources, flow rates, and transport pathways, and net flow rate (flux) to coral reef communities.
	Determine atmospheric deposition rates and concentrations of pollutants on coral reefs.
	Identify the component(s) in air samples from dust sources (e.g., Africa and Gobi Desert) and downwind sites that are toxic to coral reef organisms.
	Identify target concentration loading rates and develop bioindicators for pollutants to detect organismal and ecosystem stress at sublethal levels.
	Develop and test indicators for land-based pollutants and prioritize their use in environmental and injury assessments.
	Identify, evaluate, and track anthropogenic activity through the use of biogeochemical and biological tracers, and indicator organisms.
	Investigate algal community dynamics in response to pollutant level changes to determine their utility as an indicator of future changes in coral reefs.
	Investigate microbial organisms as indicators of nutrient, sediment, and chemical pollutants in coral reef ecosystems.
	Integrate current biological monitoring techniques with water quality monitoring data to assess potential affects of water quality on various habitat types and associated organisms.
Improve water quality by reducing land-based pollutant inputs and impacts on coral reef ecosystems.	Quantify, characterize, and prioritize the land-based sources of pollution that need to be addressed based on identified impacts to coral reefs and develop strategies to eliminate, reduce, and mitigate these impacts.
	Evaluate changes in water quality to determine the success of management actions to reduce sediment, nutrient, and chemical pollutants and other factors that degrade water quality.

Coastal Uses

ALL JURISDICTIONS	COASTAL USES
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Reduce the impacts from recreational use, industry, coastal development, and maritime vessels on coral reef ecosystems.	Quantify and characterize, both spatially and temporally, threats from commercial and recreational non-extractive activities and the impact of these activities on coral reef ecosystems, and develop strategies to eliminate, reduce, and/or mitigate these impacts.
	Develop scientific criteria to determine the carrying capacity of the reef ecosystem, and determine the level of recreational use (e.g., diving, snorkeling, and boating) that specific areas can support.
	Design and conduct demonstration projects to evaluate science-based management options for improving shoreline stability, while maintaining coral reef ecosystem functions.
	Identify and apply biological indicators toward quantification and characterization of impacts associated with coastal uses.
	Develop new technologies, construction practices, and management measures to eliminate, reduce, and/or mitigate impacts from coastal uses.
	Conduct research to better understand the economic and social factors of the human dimension and their impact on coral reef ecosystems.
	Quantify and track vessel discharges, spills, and anchor damage, and their impacts on coral reef ecosystems; and recommend mitigation measures.
Protect, conserve, and enhance the recovery of protected, threatened, and other key species. *Research needs related to acroporids are for the Atlantic Ocean only.*	<u>Acroporids</u>
	Identify the historical and current distribution of acroporids, compile this into a GIS database, and analyze spatial changes and relationships with physical, environmental, and anthropogenic factors.
	Assess (region-wide) the abundance and condition of acroporids incorporating colony size and counts per unit area of the different life stages (i.e., colonies, fragments, and new recruits).
	Evaluate the efficacy of measures to reduce anthropogenic stressors (including sedimentation, pollution, eutrophication, climate change, overfishing, and ship groundings) in enhancing recovery of existing populations of acroporids and promoting sexual recruitment.
	Evaluate the effects of storms and other natural stressors (e.g., coral predators) on the destruction and recovery of coral populations, and determine how anthropogenic disturbances may affect these natural processes.
	Evaluate the costs and benefits of various acroporid restoration strategies at promoting recovery of degraded populations, including efforts to reseed areas with larvae, optimal reattachment methods for fragments, and strategies to treat colonies affected by disease, predators, and other natural stressors.
	Identify microbial communities associated with diseased and healthy acroporid colonies; identify how these microbial communities change spatially, temporally, and under varying environmental conditions; and determine relationships between these communities and the health and mortality of colonies.
	Characterize the genetic structure and conduct demographic modeling of acroporid populations to predict population response to future disturbances and stresses encompassing a range of spatial and temporal scales.

ALL JURISDICTIONS	COASTAL USES
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Manage coral reef ecosystems and their uses in a holistic manner.	Assess the extent and condition of deep-water hermatypic coral reef ecosystems and their importance as essential fish habitat.
	Expand ecological and taxonomic understanding of functionally important, but understudied, coral reef ecosystem groups, such as sponges, octocorals, mollusks, polychaetes, crustaceans, echinoderms, tunicates, seagrasses, algae, and microbial diversity.

Invasive Species

ALL JURISDICTIONS	INVASIVE SPECIES
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Minimize the introduction and spread of alien species.	Identify possible vectors and pathways of alien introductions and develop prevention measures, where applicable.
	Determine the threat and impact of hull fouling and ballast water as mechanisms for introducing and dispersing invasive species.
Control or eradicate invasive species that have the potential to cause damage to coral reef ecosystems.	Quantify the presence and evaluate the impact of invasive species on coral reef ecosystems.
	Establish protocols for early detection and eradication of invasive species.
	Develop methods to mitigate impacts of invasive species on coral reef ecosystems and evaluate the efficacy of these methods.
	Develop and evaluate methods to monitor, contain, and sterilize ballast water to prevent introduction of invasive species to coral reef ecosystems.

Climate Change

ALL JURISDICTIONS	CLIMATE CHANGE
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Minimize the effects of climate change on coral reef ecosystems.	Bleaching of Coral Reef Organisms
	Assess the spatial and temporal scales of bleaching of coral reef organisms during identified bleaching events.
	Quantify the relationships between severity of bleaching events and mortality including factors that exacerbate bleaching impacts or confer resistance and resilience.
	Quantify the socioeconomic impacts of coral bleaching events on user groups and the economy and investigate user group perceptions of coral bleaching events.
	Identify factors and their thresholds that cause coral bleaching (including physical parameters, environmental factors, and anthropogenic stressors) and investigate interactions between factors and the severity of bleaching events and the ability of corals to recover from bleaching.
	Identify the potential for coral reefs to adapt to future bleaching events through changes in clades of zooxanthellae in individual species and shifts in taxonomic composition of symbiotic organisms.
	Develop early warning systems for coral reef bleaching based on known or predicted relationships with environmental factors (e.g., temperature and light) and catastrophic pollution events (e.g., oil spills and toxic discharges).
	Develop models to predict long-term impacts to coral reef ecosystems from coral bleaching events and climate change incorporating relationships with environmental and anthropogenic stressors.
	Calcification
	Investigate variations in rates of coral calcification among species, temporally and spatially, and within different life stages, and how those variations may affect survivorship.
	Investigate how differing levels of atmospheric CO_2 will affect ocean pH, carbonate saturation state, and coral calcification and growth rates.
	Quantify the effects of temperature, pH, and aragonite saturation state on calcification, reproduction, and recruitment.
	Measure biogenic $CaCO_3$ production, seawater chemistry, $CaCO_3$ dissolution and accumulation, bioerosion, and off-shelf export of $CaCO_3$ to improve the accounting of coral reef carbonate budgets and predict how reef accretion may change in the future.
	Determine how variations in calcification rates affect associated organisms, food web dynamics, carbon and nutrient cycling, and ecosystem services.
	Examine how reduced saturation states of $CaCO_3$ affect rates of bioerosion.
	Waves
	Determine the relationships among wave energy, coral reef damage, and factors that increase or minimize damage to reefs and coastal communities.
Mitigate the impacts from climate change on coral reef ecosystems.	Determine the effectiveness of management strategies to reduce anthropogenic stressors in mitigating the severity of bleaching.
	Evaluate available tools and develop new tools to quantify and mitigate the impacts of climate change on coral reef ecosystems.
Predict the future composition and condition of coral reefs under various climate change scenarios	Quantify organism and ecosystem responses to climate change and determine their relationships with stressors and pertinent physical, biological, and chemical parameters.
	Examine the impacts of past climate fluctuations on coral community structure.
	Develop tools to detect and describe decadal changes in relation to natural and anthropogenic disturbances.

Extreme Events

ALL JURISDICTIONS	EXTREME EVENTS
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Identify and reduce the incidence of disease in coral reef ecosystems.	Determine temporal and spatial variations in disease prevalence among reef-building coral species across habitats, depths, and varying distances from land and their relationships with environmental factors and anthropogenic stressors.
	Quantify the rates and extent of partial and whole colony mortality from diseases, the effect of partial mortality on individual colonies (e.g., effect on reproduction and growth), and long-term impacts on affected coral reef ecosystems.
	In the event of a major die-off of corals resulting from disease, quantify the ecological and socioeconomic impacts.
	Identify external sources of pathogens (e.g., human sewage and dust) and disease vectors and quantify their distribution and abundance.
	Determine the distribution, abundance, and impact of diseases affecting other ecologically important benthic coral reef invertebrates (e.g., sponges and urchins) and fishes.
	Identify factors that increase the prevalence and impact of diseases (e.g., toxins, pollutants, sedimentation, temperature, and biotic agents), including factors and processes that increase the virulence of pathogens, increase host susceptibility and/or reduce resistance, and contribute to the transmission and spread of diseases.
	Identify and characterize the etiology of key coral diseases, including identification of biotic and abiotic causes.
	Characterize microbial communities associated with corals and coral mucus; the variations among species, seasons, and locations; identify factors that cause variations in microflora; and characterize the consequences of these changes to the host (e.g., shift from a symbiotic association to a disease-causing state).
	Develop standardized nomenclature, diagnostic characteristics, standardized field and laboratory methodologies, and rapid response protocols to enhance the comparability of data, improve capacity to respond to disease outbreaks and report on findings, and to identify viable management responses.
	Develop early warning systems for disease outbreaks based on known or predicted relationships of coral reefs with environmental factors (e.g., temperature and hurricanes) and catastrophic pollution events (e.g., oil spill and toxic discharge).
	Develop models to forecast long-term effects of disease on population dynamics, community structure, and ecosystem function incorporating information on biotic agents, environmental factors, and anthropogenic stressors known or predicted to affect disease prevalence and incidence.
	Characterize healthy and diseased corals on a cellular and physiological level (e.g., histological changes, immunological responses, and production of stress proteins).
	Develop tools to reduce the prevalence of diseases, mitigate their impacts, and treat affected corals.

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORTING RESEARCH & MANAGEMENT

Marine Protected Areas

ALL JURISDICTIONS	MARINE PROTECTED AREAS
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Evaluate and improve the effectiveness of MPAs as a management tool.	Develop site-selection criteria for MPAs to assist in the conservation of coral reef ecosystems and management of commercially important fishery species, taking into account: o Species diversity, trophic structure, and abundance of economically or ecologically important species. o Habitat utilization patterns of different life stages. o Larval recruitment, dispersal, and connectivity (including sources and sinks). o Connectivity between habitat types (including seagrass beds, mangroves, and other associated communities), spawning aggregations, and nursery areas. o Environmental factors and anthropogenic stressors.
	Develop models to predict changes to coral reef resources that may occur under different zoning schemes, taking into account ways to conserve and possibly enhance marine resources.
	Evaluate the effectiveness of MPAs, including no-take reserves and other marine zoning schemes, taking into account: o Abundance of ecologically and economically important species. o Spillover of fishery species into adjacent habitats. o Improvements in the condition of the sessile benthic community and abundance of mobile invertebrates. o Cascading effects on non-target species.
	Develop useful indicators (biophysical and socioeconomic) of management effectiveness.
	Determine the socioeconomic and ecological costs and benefits of MPAs as a management tool, including relationships between levels of compliance and achieved benefits.

Habitat Restoration

ALL JURISDICTIONS	HABITAT RESTORATION
Management Objective	***Research Need***
Restore injured and degraded coral reef habitat.	Identify and test new coral reef restoration strategies, including transplantation and attachment techniques; optimal fragment size, shape, and orientation; ability to withstand high-energy events; and use of environmentally-friendly exotic materials.
	Determine the effectiveness of efforts to collect and settle coral larvae as a restoration tool.
	Design and evaluate techniques to control or eradicate organisms that may inhibit recovery of damaged or degraded habitats.
	Evaluate the effectiveness of current strategies to restore degraded reefs (e.g., culturing corals in a laboratory, transplanting fragments, and creating coral nurseries), taking into account the ability to maintain genetic variability, mitigate source(s) of the damage, maintain the historical distribution of the species within that habitat, and restore habitat function.
	Evaluate effectiveness of restoration techniques for associated habitats, including mangroves, seagrass beds, sandy beaches, and riparian habitats.
	Determine the impacts of exotic materials (e.g., iron, cement, rubber, and fiberglass) on recruitment efficiency, biodiversity, and community structure.
	Evaluate the ecological recovery of restored areas.
	Evaluate the effectiveness of restocking ecologically important species (e.g., *Diadema* and herbivorous fishes), and the costs and benefits of restocking using species raised in captivity versus wild populations.