

THE REGION

Bigger marine reserve proposed

Plan seeks to limit fishing in Tortugas ecological zones

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MARATHON — Federal officials Friday proposed closing more than 151 square miles of state and federal waters to fishing as part of a marine preservation plan that would expand the boundaries of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

The proposal, which would establish a Tortugas Ecological Reserve, would create "no-take" zones in the areas called Tortugas North and Tortugas South. It would also expand the sanctuary boundaries by 96 square nautical miles to include two critical coral reef areas known as Sherwood Forest and Riley's Hump.

The area, 70 miles west of Key West and more than 140 miles from mainland Florida, is known for its abundant sea life, including lobsters, reef fish, deep-water fish, stone crabs, and golden crab.

About 30 of the more than 400 members of the Monroe County Commercial Fishermen association fish in the Tortugas, but it was unclear what the impact of the proposed "no-take" zones would be on them, since areas off the Tortugas would still be open to commercial fishing.

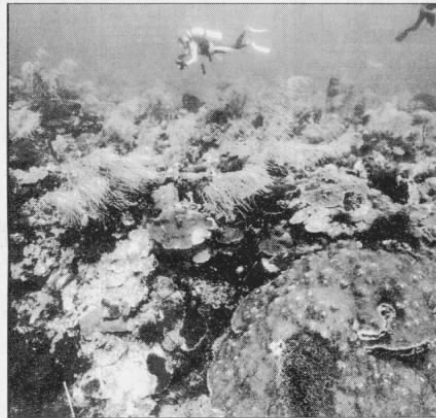
Friday's release of the proposed regulations launched a 60-day public comment period in which people can offer their opinions through the Internet, by regular mail or by attending one of five public hearings throughout Florida — in Key West, Marathon, Homestead, Naples and St. Petersburg.

A sixth hearing will be held in Washington. A similar series of meetings was held throughout South Florida in November 1998 to gather ideas on creating a reserve.

Billy Causey, superintendent of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, said the proposed reserve was designed to protect one of last unspoiled marine habitats in the United States.

The Tortugas not only boast the richest coral content and healthiest coral in the sanctuary, but the highest water quality because of its isolation. Waters of both the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico pass through the Tortugas region, making a productive and diverse marine area.

Causey said the reserve would serve numerous purposes, including replenishing fish populations and restricting anchoring and vessel dis-



MARINE MISSION: Bill Causey, above, superintendent of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, speaks Friday on a proposal to establish "no-take" boundaries within an expanded sanctuary around the Dry Tortugas. At left is a section of the unusual coral formation called Sherwood Forest, in the marine sanctuary.

the resources out there."

Contrary to the sanctuary's past conflicts with those who frequent the Tortugas, an alliance of commercial, charter and recreational fishermen and environmentalists has endorsed the proposed reserve.

Greg DiDomenico, executive director of Monroe County Commercial Fishermen, said the "ecosystem approach" taken by the working group that developed the proposal helped ease the concerns of fishermen this time around.

He said the proposal analyzed the costs and benefits of no-take regulations on various industries such as commercial fishing and determined a reserve plan based on natural resources rather than jurisdictional boundaries.

To receive a copy of the proposal, call the sanctuary at 305-743-2437 or visit the Tortugas 2000 Web site at <http://fpac.fsu.edu/tortugas>.

charge. The idea, Causey said, is to protect the Tortugas now before there is nothing left to protect.

"This is something that will be world-class in proportion," Causey said of the reserve.

The proposal was developed by a 25-member working group that

included commercial and recreational fishermen, divers, conservationists, researchers, citizens and state and federal officials.

"[The Tortugas] is a place people visit more often than ever now," Causey said. "We believe this is a way to help minimize human disturbance on