

# Staghorn and elkhorn corals now protected

June 9 2006

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Caribbean elkhorn and staghorn corals Thursday were placed under the protection of the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Conservationists immediately issued a call for a ban on the sale of the corals, which can still be legally sold in shell shops and souvenir stores since the items were collected before the protected status took effect.

The two species of coral are on the list of "threatened" species protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Both species were once dominant builders of Caribbean coral reefs, but during the last 30 years experienced dramatic declines. The new federal protection is an effort to reverse that decline, thought to have been the result of disease, global warming and hurricanes.

"These coral species are now protected to a similar degree as bald eagles and loggerhead turtles here in the United States," said Andrew Baker, an assistant professor at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science. "The fact that their dead remains can still be purchased ... reveals how much we need to raise awareness of the plight of these corals. The stigma attached to purchasing elephant tusks or sea turtle shells does not exist for these threatened corals."

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Citation: Staghorn and elkhorn corals now protected (2006, June 9) retrieved 10 June 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2006-06-staghorn-elkhorn-corals.html>

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