

# Gulf of Mexico Deep-Sea Corals Win Protection

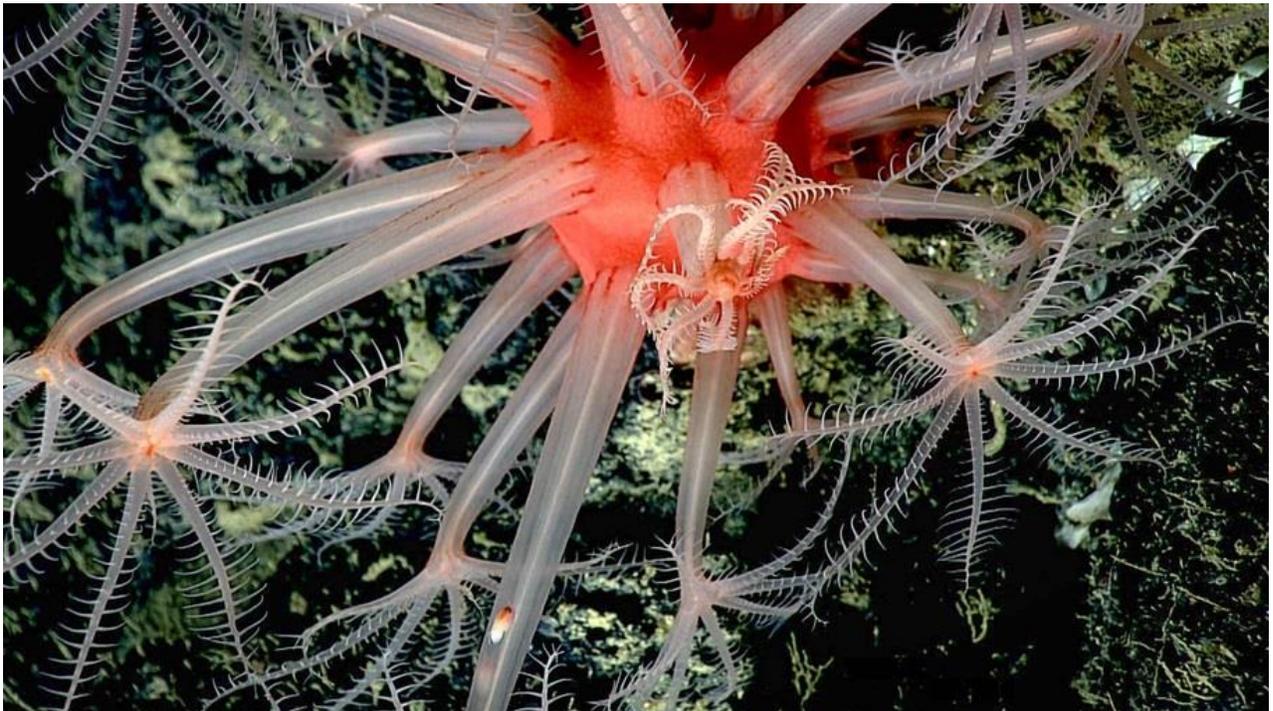
Federal rule restricts harmful fishing gear where critical, vulnerable species grow

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By: [Holly Binns](#) Topics: [Ocean Conservation](#) Projects: [Conserving Marine Life in the United States](#)

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## Gulf of Mexico Deep-Sea Corals Win Protection



A sea lily (Crinoidea) rests in the middle of a mushroom coral (Anthomastus sp.) at about 7,000-8,000 feet deep in the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists documented the pair on NOAA's 2018 Okeanos Expedition during a research cruise to the West Florida Escarpment and DeSoto Canyon areas. NOAA

They are fragile, ancient, and vital to the marine ecosystem. And now they're protected. Federal officials today issued a final rule to safeguard Gulf of Mexico deep-sea coral hot spots—priority areas for conservation, management, and research—by restricting damaging fishing gear in most of those areas.

More than 11,000 people signed their names in support of the measure during a final round of public comment in fall 2019; the plan was initiated in 2014 and went through multiple rounds of public input and revision. The protections mark a major milestone in

safeguarding coral ecosystems that provide food, shelter, and breeding grounds for wildlife ranging from sharks and crabs to fish such as snapper and grouper.

The U.S. Department of Commerce secretary approved the first-of-its-kind plan that won initial approval in June 2018 from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council. Before the vote, nearly 18,000 people signed their names or wrote comments urging the council to act.

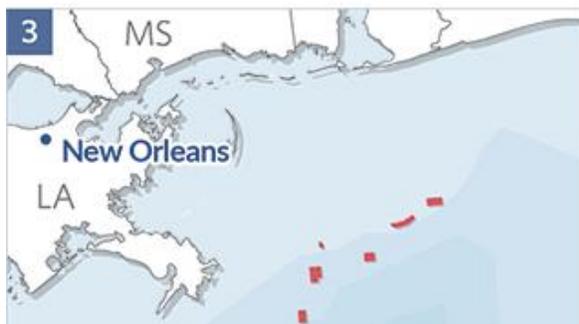
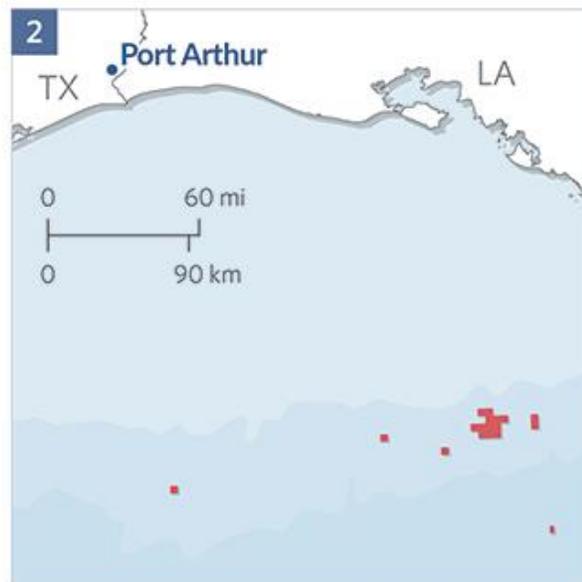
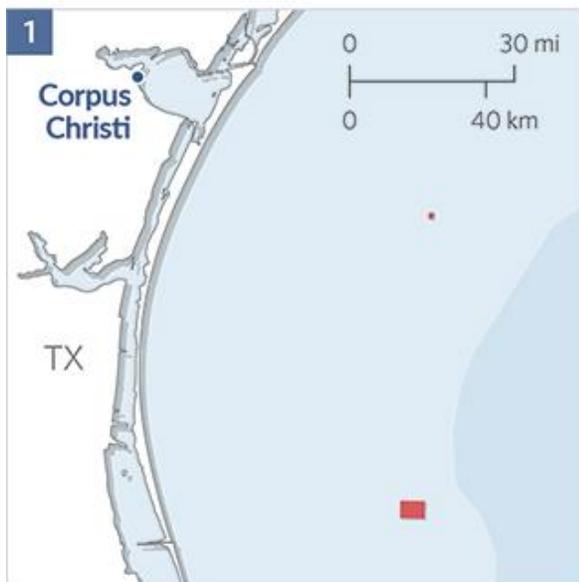
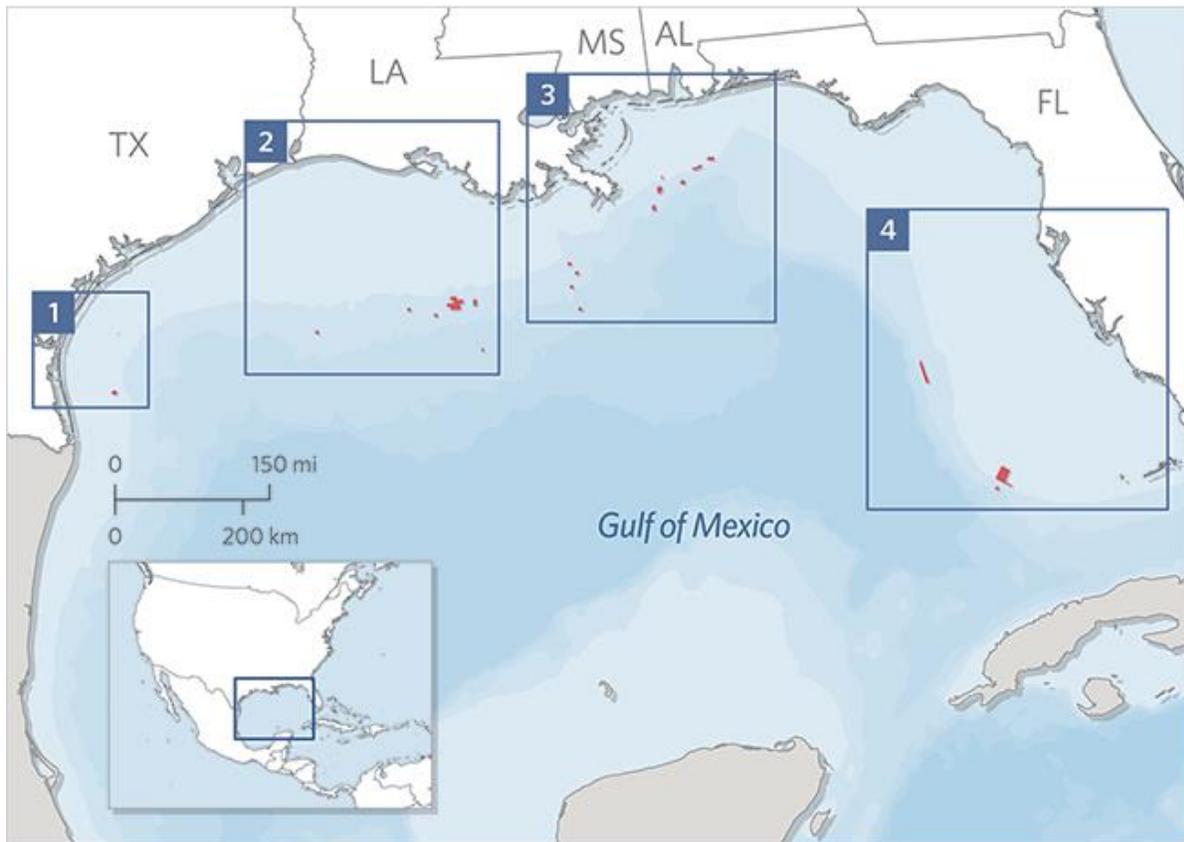


An orange fly-trap anemone rests on a *Lophelia pertusa* reef at Viosca Knoll in the Gulf of Mexico at about 1,640 feet deep. NOAA

The decision designates 21 [sites](#) totaling 484 square miles (more than twice the size of New Orleans) as Habitat Areas of Particular Concern. It also allows the Gulf council to recommend measures to avoid, mitigate, or offset any adverse impacts from activities authorized by federal or state agencies at these sites, including oil and gas exploration and drilling. In most of the new areas, the council restricted damaging fishing gear, such as trawls, traps, anchors, and longlines, which can break or smother corals. Trolling and other hook-and-line fishing will still be allowed, because those methods do not normally affect the deep ocean floor where these corals live.

# Gulf of Mexico Deep-Sea Coral Hot Spots

Protections slated for 21 sites totaling 484 square miles



Safeguarding coral ecosystems is important because they are fragile, [slow-growing](#), and critical to the long-term survival of a wide variety of other species. Once damaged, corals can take centuries to recover, if they survive at all. Some deep-sea corals can grow hundreds of feet tall, while others live for thousands of years. Coral ecosystems are also natural disease fighters, with some holding properties that are producing [treatments for medical conditions](#), including cancer.



An octocoral (*Metallogorgia* sp.) and a commensal brittle star (*Ophiocreas* sp.) photographed at about 6,000 feet deep during a 2017 NOAA research cruise along the northern West Florida Escarpment in the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists believe these two species co-evolved, meaning they need each other for survival. NOAA

The Pew Charitable Trusts encourages the council to take the further step of restricting damaging fishing gear in all sites with rich coral communities identified by scientists. Today's approved safeguards, which go into effect in 30 days, focus on sites that scientists, fishermen, and others agreed should be prioritized for protection. At a 2014 meeting, experts initially identified 47 significant coral hot spots, including the most recent batch, in the Gulf that needed safeguards. The council could eventually extend its coral management plan to cover other coral areas identified by scientists.



A thorny tinseltail (Grammicolepis brachiusculus) and a squat lobster (Eumunida picta) visit a dense grouping of Lophelia pertusa deep-sea coral at 1,627 feet deep along the West Florida Slope. NOAA

By protecting these ecosystems, fisheries managers have shown their commitment to conserving vital habitat, which will benefit an array of marine life as well as current and future generations of anglers, commercial fishermen, seafood consumers, and countless others, all of whom reap benefits from a healthy Gulf of Mexico.

*Holly Binns directs The Pew Charitable Trusts' efforts to protect ocean life in the Gulf of Mexico and the U.S. Caribbean.*

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