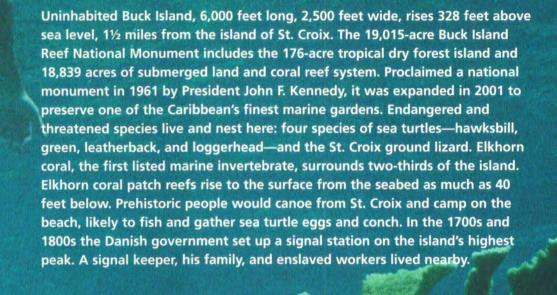
50th Anniversary 2011





## **Coral Reefs**

Coral reefs are complex invertebrate colonies of animals called polyps. Each tiny polyp produces a carbonate skeleton that results in massive, but fragile formations. Filter feeders, polyps eat floating plankton they trap in their tentacles. As polyps die, new ones grow on their remains to expand the reef. Polyps and the algae (zooxanthellae) living in them have a mutually beneficial relationship enabling coral reefs to support a great diversity of animal and plant life. Rich with life, coral reefs have existed for millions of years. They are as ancient as rain forests.



Spiny lobsters hide by day and feed at night. Its shell hard. In the ancient coral reef environment, ways to exploit every

niche have evolved. Here get extracted and are redistributed, and many organisms find shelter from predators.



Coral reefs (in red) grow

in tropical waters whose temperatures are over 70°F all year. The best growth occurs just a few Recently coral reefs have suffered the effects of hurricanes and diseases.

## **Buck Island's Barrier Reef**

**Buck Island Reef's underwater scene humbles** human perception with its variety of shape, pattern, color, texture, and movement. Like fortress walls, thick, branching elkhorn corals rise off the seabed to dominate the underwater

The irregular arc of reef around Buck Island's northern and eastern shores creates a lagoon between reef and island. Wide and shallow, the lagoon is seldom over 12 feet deep, and the protecting reef moderates wave action. In these calmer waters brain corals grow larger, almost reaching the surface. Seaward of the barrier reef, elkhorn and star coral patch reefs occur around the island, except to the southwest, where seagrass beds are prevalent.



Elkhorn coral

spend up to 60 minutes

ashore, selecting a nest

to the sea after carefully

covering her nest. Two

site, digging the egg

chamber, laying some 140 eggs, and returning



Blue tangs (above) graze en masse in reef shallows. A flamingo tonque sea snail (right) accents a sea fan.



## Fragile and Endangered

Worldwide, coral reefs are disappearing quickly. The national monument They are slow-growing and vulnerable to pollution, sedimentation, overfishing, warming of the seas, and boat damage. When a coral is stressed, the coral polyps expel the internal algae that help nourish them, causing them to appear "bleached." If severely affected, the corals will die. Because corals thrive only in a narrow range of conditions, biologists see their plight as a planetary danger signal.

is protected habitat for threatened and endangered species.

Research on hawksbill turtles produces valuable information for their survival in the Caribbean. Human introduction of mongooses and rats. exotic species, may have wiped out the St. Croix ground lizard, which was recently reintroduced on the island (right).



Endangered hawksbill, leatherback, and green sea turtles (left to right) are protected by law. Every two to three summers they migrate here to nest in shoreline for-ests and on beaches. A



months later hatchlings emerge and crawl to the sea. Please do not disturb nesting turtles or

**Buck Island Reef National** Monument is a Marine



Protected Area. No fishing or taking of animal or plant life is allowed.

Do not collect or even disturb artifacts. They are important pieces of history. Please tell a



park ranger what you

it. All artifacts are pro-

tected by federal law,

and they teach us more

saw and where you saw

Least tern

**Buck Island Reef National** 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in visit www.nps.gov.

