



ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE

finding the ways that work

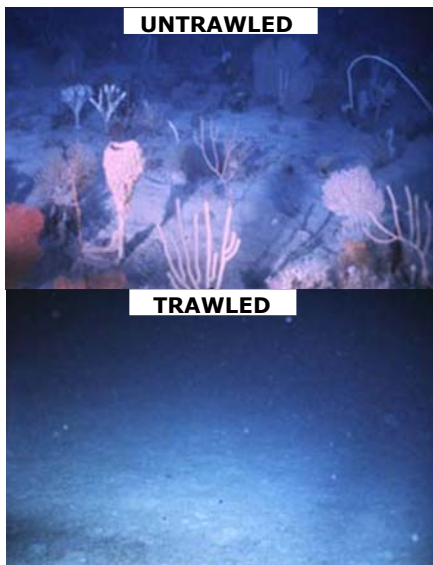
Protecting New England's Deep-Water Corals

Most people associate corals with tropical seas, but offshore canyons in New England contain an impressive variety of spectacular corals. Large deep-water coral communities are home to a wide range of fish and invertebrate species that depend on the fragile coral structures for food and shelter. Fishermen in the North Atlantic have known for hundreds of years that these corals flourish in the deep ocean. But, scientists are just learning about the biology of these animals whose lifespan may be centuries long.

What we do know for sure is that these corals grow very, very slowly. In half a century, even the most prolific corals have only grown to the size of an average shrub in your front yard. But corals even centuries old have been swept away with one pass of a fishing trawler or a poorly placed fish trap.



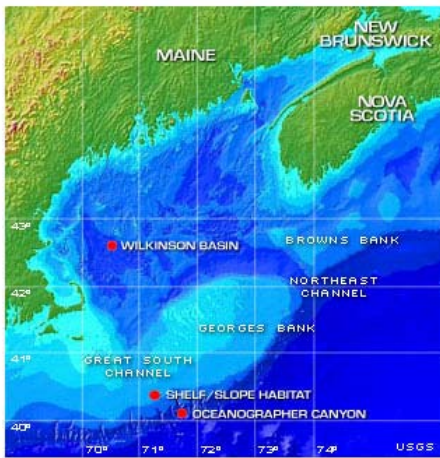
A New England deep sea coral garden (NOAA)



Trawling can devastate coral gardens. Australia, North West Shelf, first photo taken in an area where trawling has not been allowed; second photo taken in an area heavily trawled by pair-trawlers (Keith Sainsbury)

In September 2004, Environmental Defense successfully lobbied the New England Fishery Management Council for protection of two deep-water canyons from certain types of fishing gear that is routinely dragged across the ocean floor. The vote to protect those two canyons was nearly unanimous, with one abstention and no negative votes. Our goal is to secure protections for 12 canyons in the Northeast, and we were pleased with this first, very positive step.

Environmental Defense's Sally McGee, who serves as chair of the Council's habitat committee, led this effort. She worked through the Council and in concert with other environmental organizations. It was really a tag team effort. Another conservation group raised the issue from the audience about the need for protection of vulnerable coral reefs. Then, through Environmental Defense's membership on the Council, Sally took it across the finish line, establishing the first protections for deep-water corals in New England.



In addition to coral gardens in canyons along the outer continental shelf, coral occurs throughout the Gulf of Maine.
(Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution)

The good news for unprotected coral habitats is that the Council is now developing a comprehensive habitat protection plan. As chair of the Council's habitat committee, Sally is leading the Council to protect habitat for the benefit of fish, fishermen and all of us who have an interest in ocean resources.

Tilefish and monkfish, favorites in many U.S. fish markets, depend on habitats in deep-water canyons for their survival. By taking an ecosystem approach, protecting not just the fish but their habitat too, Environmental Defense is confident that deep-water corals, boulder reefs, kelp beds and other biologically diverse habitats will be protected.

Action Plan for 2005

Complete development of conservation policy for marine protected areas.

Secure New England Fishery Management Council approval of areas deemed to be essential habitat for fish.

Prevent existing coral protections from being whittled away by exemptions granted to special interests (e.g., monkfish, tilefish, red crab and offshore lobster fishery).

Secure designation of the most critical habitats, including deep-water canyons, as "habitat areas of particular concern" – an important stepping-stone toward comprehensive habitat protections.

Encourage the New England Fishery Management Council to host Marine Protected Area policy public hearings with Environmental Defense staffer Sally McGee as lead.

**For more information contact Sally McGee (860) 572-0190
and visit [http:// www.oceansalive.org](http://www.oceansalive.org)**