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States Impose Hefty Fines to Protect Delicate Coral

As any good diver or snorkeler knows, there is nothing so breathtaking or so delicate as coral reef. Coral is so delicate, in fact, that even the slightest human contact can be catastrophic enough to kill 500-year-old coral in just five minutes. Such frequent agitation is precipitating irreparable harm to one of nature's most spectacular wonders.



With an eye toward protecting coral and maintaining the splendor of a popular tourist attraction, the Board of Land and Natural Resources of Hawaii has begun imposing fines on companies and individuals guilty of damaging the state's remarkable reefs. The board began issuing the fines two years ago as part of a larger effort to preserve Hawaii's fragile natural resources that are such a central part of the tourist trade, Hawaii's number one industry.

For example, a Maui tour company was fined \$400,000 for damage it caused to coral colonies located between the islands of Maui and Kahoolawe. The U.S. Navy has been cited for similar harm to coral reefs, and Hawaii is seeking recovery of the alleged damages in a corresponding lawsuit.

The fines are stiff in accordance with the perceived damage being done not only to tourism, but to the abundant coral reef. In fact, 84 percent of the coral in the United States is found in Hawaii and the state agency tasked with preserving that resource takes its job very seriously. "People are going to have to be more careful out here, because if it keeps getting damaged, we're going to lose it," said Laura Thielen, chairwoman of the state Board of Land and Natural Resources, which decides how much to fine. "We have to take some very strong action or else it's going to be too late." There is a sense among naturalists and sportsmen alike that there is an urgent need for the vigilant conservation of Hawaiian coral. Tori Cullins, one of the owners of Wild Side Specialty Tours in Waianae, on the island of Oahu, is in favor of the penalties: "Unless you hit people in the pocketbook, I don't think it's going to matter much."

Hawaii is not alone in its active protection of the coral under its jurisdiction, however. Florida, whose shores are home to approximately 2 percent of American coral, is following Hawaii's lead. Under the Florida Coral Reef Protection Act, recently enacted by the unanimous vote of the state legislature, Florida may fine violators anywhere from \$150 to \$250,000, depending on the gravity of the damage. Prior to the passage of this legislation, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which is responsible for guarding the state's reefs, sought compensation through the courts, a much slower process.

For its part, the federal government is currently involved in numerous lawsuits seeking compensation for damages done to underwater coral monuments under its control.



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