

# Bathymetric Analysis of Coral Reef Habitat in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary

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## ABSTRACT

In September 2009, multibeam sonar data were collected aboard the NOAA Ship NANCY FOSTER throughout the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. The three sites surveyed during the September cruise are located southeast of Vaca Key, south of Key West, and west of Dry Tortugas.

The focus of the investigation was to provide coastal managers with information concerning coral reef habitats, fish populations, and natural resource distribution, to assist with NOAA's Marine Spatial Planning initiative. CARIS HIPS 7.0 software was used to process bathymetric data that were collected using a SIMRAD EM1002 multibeam sonar data acquisition system. Water depths range between 12 and 120 m with reef habitats located in waters shallower than 30 m at the Dry Tortugas site. Numerous scientific dives were conducted to assess fish populations and reef biodiversity. Ongoing explorations are necessary west of Dry Tortugas to monitor the effect of preservation on reef habitats.

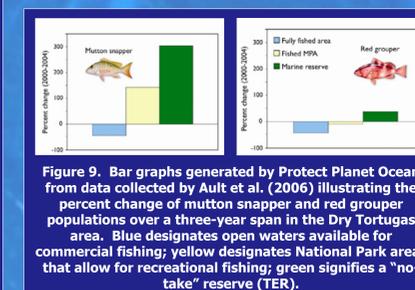
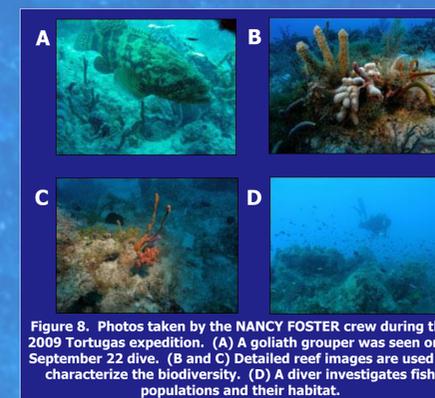
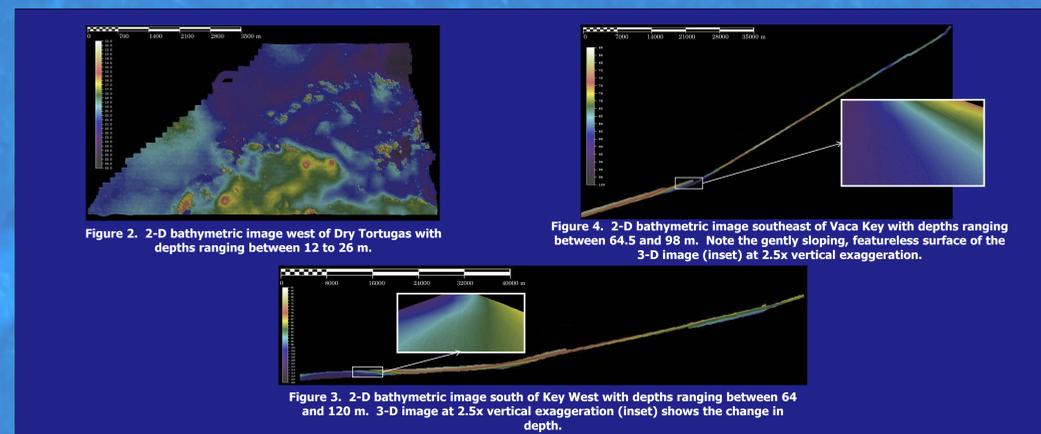
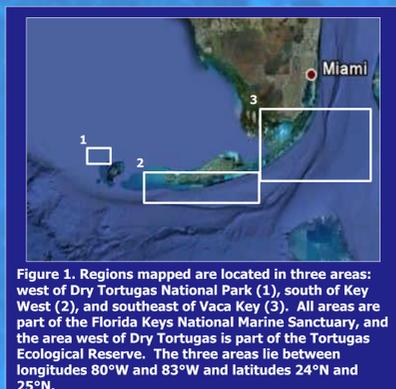
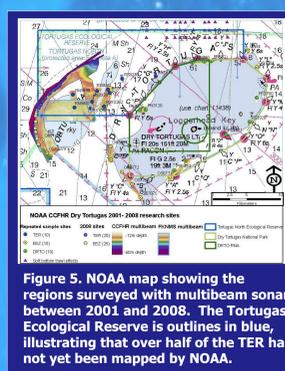
## BACKGROUND

The Tortugas Ecological Reserve (TER), effective since July 1, 2001, is a comprehensive plan developed by the National Park Service and NOAA as part of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, designed to protect the biodiversity of the region. The TER covers 90 square nautical miles and is designated as a "no-take" area to protect grouper and snapper populations that are susceptible to endangerment.

The 2009 Dry Tortugas expedition aboard the NOAA Ship *Nancy Foster* was led by scientists from NOAA's Center for Coastal Fisheries and Habitat Research from September 22-30 in three areas in southern Florida (Figure 1): west of Dry Tortugas (Figure 2), south of Key West (Figure 3), and southeast of Vaca Key (Figure 4). The cruise consisted of multibeam sonar analysis used to record the bathymetry of the TER, as some areas had not been mapped previously (Figure 5). Additionally, over 30 scientific dives were employed for the purpose of characterizing reef ecosystems and monitoring fish populations. The goliath grouper (*Epinephelus itajara*) and mutton snapper (*Lutjanus analis*) can be used to indicate the health of the ecosystem, as these fish were rarely spotted in this area before the enactment of the TER due to overfishing (NOAA). These grouper and snapper populations flourish in reef and hard bottom habitats in shallow waters (Florida Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Marine Station).

## RESULTS

- Key West (Figure 3) and Vaca Key (Figure 4) are gently sloping areas with no carbonate structures present.
- Dry Tortugas (Figure 2) has a variety of bathymetric features between 12 and 26 m. Figure 7(A) and Figure 7 (Profile 1) depict coral pinnacles across a gently sloping area. Figure 7(B) and Figure 7 (Profile 2) illustrate carbonate mounds that are present throughout a large portion of the region surveyed. A deep depression is also noted in Figure 7 (Profile 2). Figure 7(C) and Figure 7 (Profile 3) illustrate the variety of features found in the area, depicting more carbonate mounds and depressions. Figure 7(C) is located atop a large platform that likely extends southward below the study area.
- The bathymetric features present west of Dry Tortugas are ideal habitats for adult snapper and grouper populations (Florida Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Marine Station)
- The NOAA crew reported an increase in goliath grouper (Figure 8A) and mutton snapper sightings since the early 2000's before enactment of the TER.



## METHODS

- Cruise conducted aboard NOAA Ship NANCY FOSTER (Figure 6) from September 22-30, 2009.
- Raw data were acquired using Simrad EM1002 multibeam sonar system.
- CTD recorder employed to collect data about the water profile surveyed.
- Raw data were converted and edited using CARIS HIPS 7.0 software.
- Background research was conducted on grouper and snapper populations to provide an accurate assessment of fish habitats in coral ecosystems.

## Bathymetry West of Dry Tortugas

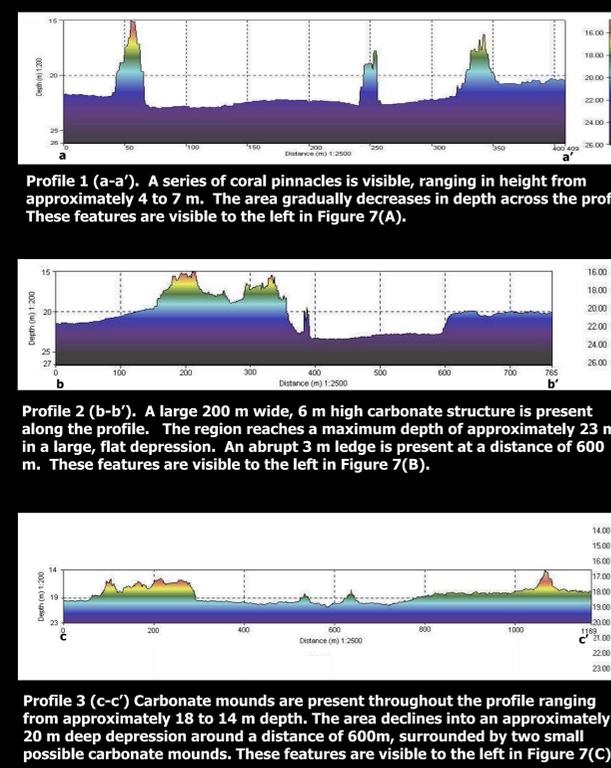
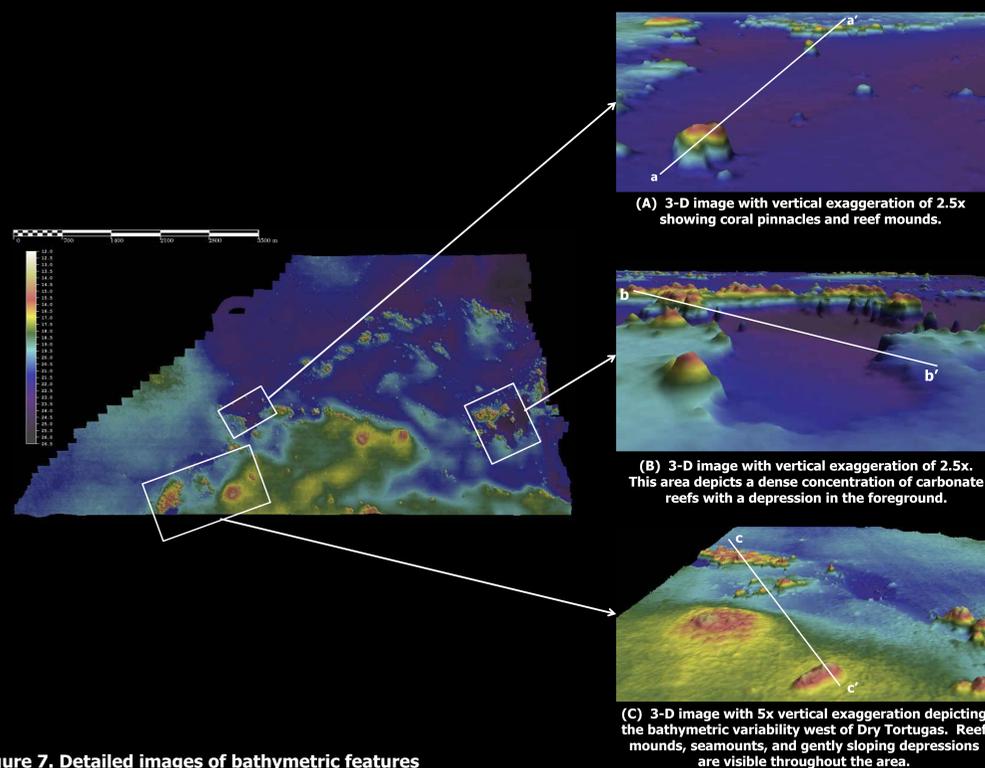


Figure 7. Detailed images of bathymetric features

## References

- Ault, Jerald S., Smith, Steven G., Bohnsack, James A., Luo, Jiansang, Harper, Douglas E., and McClellan, David B. "Building Sustainable Fisheries in Florida's Coral Reef Ecosystem: Positive Signs in the Dry Tortugas." *Bulletin of Marine Science*, 78(3): 633-654. 2006.
- Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida (<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/gallery/descript/goliathgrouper/goliathgrouper.html>)
- NOAA Dry Tortugas Expedition 2009 (<http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/missions/2009tortugas/welcome.html>)
- Protect Planet Ocean (<http://www.protectplanetoccean.org/collections/successandlessons/casestudy/drytortugas/casestudy.html>)
- Smithsonian Marine Station, Fort Pierce ([http://www.sms.si.edu/IRLSpec/Lutjan\\_analis.htm](http://www.sms.si.edu/IRLSpec/Lutjan_analis.htm))

## Acknowledgements

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## CONCLUSIONS

- The region surveyed within the TER is a prime location for grouper and snapper habitats, as the fish dwell in shallow reef ecosystems with hard, rocky bottoms (Florida Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Marine Station).
- Enactment of the TER has been beneficial, as NOAA and Ault et al. (2006) both report an increase of grouper and snapper populations that are endangered by overfishing (Figure 9).
- Further mapping of the region should be conducted, as NOAA reports that the bathymetric data have not yet been collected for the entire TER (Figure 5).
- A complete map of the bathymetric features of the TER can be used to identify probable fish habitats for scientific dives. Additional dive areas will lead to a more accurate idea of fish populations.
- Areas outside the TER adjacent to the "no-take" zones should also be monitored over time. Increased data over time can provide coastal managers with a causal relationship between "no-take" zoning and increased fish populations. This may eventually lead to an expansion of the TER.



Figure 6. NOAA Ship NANCY FOSTER



This project was generated as part of the CoC Geology Department's 2010 Seafloor Mapping Program. <http://oceanica.cofc.edu/multibeam>