

Riverbanks Plays Critical Role in Turning the Tide on Corals in Crisis

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[Columbia, SC] – Riverbanks Zoo and Garden is now home to 36 coral colonies that have been rescued from the Florida Reef Tract (FRT), the third largest reef tract in the world, where an unidentified disease is causing critical coral loss.

Riverbanks is among select conservation partners working alongside federal and state agencies to save remaining healthy corals along the FRT as part of The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) – Florida Reef Tract Rescue project. Scientific monitoring has indicated that in the last five years, many Florida corals have sustained up to 90% reduction in abundance because of an unidentified stony coral tissue loss disease.

“Because of the disease’s rapid progression, it’s expected that one-third of the coral species found in Florida could soon become extinct,” said Jennifer Rawlings, aquarium curator at Riverbanks Zoo and Garden. “Riverbanks is among select land-based facilities housing and caring for unaffected stony corals while researchers try to better understand the disease, its impact on the FRT, and how future outbreaks can be prevented.”

The rescue project is two-fold: 1) to prevent extinction along the FRT for the most vulnerable species, and 2) to maintain as much genetic diversity as possible for 25 priority species in preparation for restoration and possible future habitat disturbances. The corals being cared for at Riverbanks were collected in mid-April southwest of Key West.

The FRT extends 360 miles from Port St. Lucie, Florida to Dry Tortugas National Park west of the Florida Keys. The biodiverse area is a critical habitat for many marine animals and more than 80 species of corals—seven of which are listed under the Endangered Species Act. Recent reports by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and National Marine Sanctuaries indicate the disease has spread beyond Key West to St. Thomas. The disease also has been recently detected in the Dominican Republic, Turks and Caicos, and Belize.

Riverbanks is one of 10 AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums in a public contest for grant funding that will support a conservation initiative of the organization’s choice. Riverbanks has selected the Florida Reef Tract Rescue. First place will receive \$25,000, and the runner-up will be awarded \$10,000. [Vote now through July 31 at 11:59pm to help Riverbanks secure funding to save corals in crisis.](#)