

Key West hopes a ban on certain sunscreens will help coral reefs

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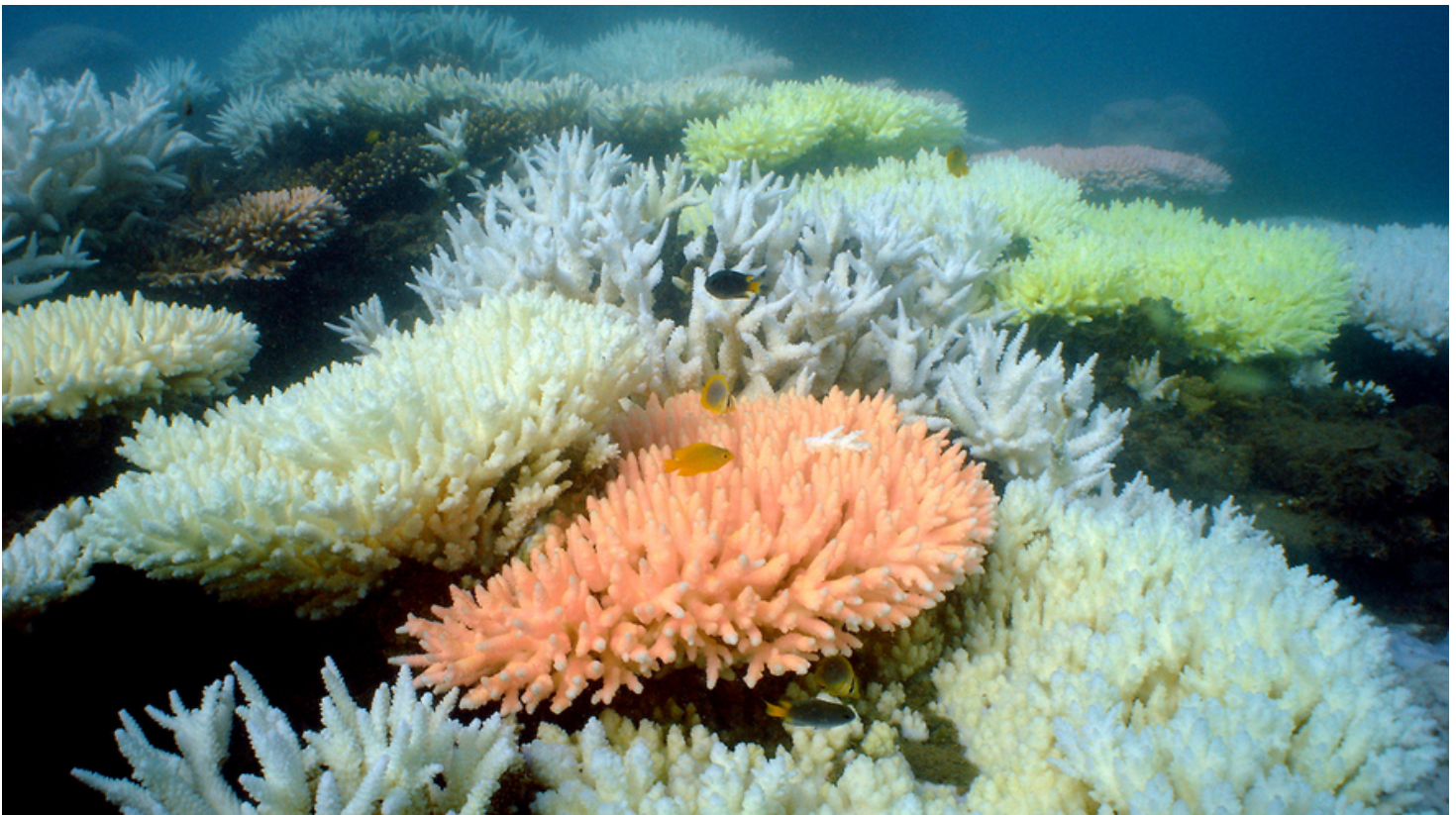


Image 1. Fish swim through a portion of coral reef. One cause of the loss of coral is coral bleaching. Photo by: Ray Berkelmans, Australian Institute of Marine Science

Certain sunscreens soon will no longer be sold in a city in the Florida Keys. It's part of an effort to protect coral reefs.

Key West is located at the bottom tip of Florida. City leaders there voted to ban sunscreens containing oxybenzone and octinoxate. The two chemicals have been shown to damage coral reefs. The vote was held February 5. Key West will ban the sale of such sunscreens in the city starting in January 2021.

Key West is following the lead of Hawaii. It became the first state to pass a similar ban.

National Treasures At Risk

The U.S. Geological Survey has called America's coral reefs "national treasures" that are at risk. It said that the undersea structures, made of skeletons and living coral, are "dying at alarming rates."

"To me, this is a pretty black-and-white issue," Key West Mayor Teri Johnston said.

"There are thousands of sunscreens out there, and we have one reef," she added. "And we have an opportunity to do one small thing to protect that."

Some brands sell sunscreens without oxybenzone and octinoxate. However, there are still many sold with those chemicals.

For years, oxybenzone and octinoxate have been used to protect people's skin from the sun. However, some studies have shown that products with these chemicals can wash off during swimming or bathing. They can get into the water and damage coral reefs, studies show.

Ban Meant To Protect The Great Florida Reef

Johnston said that the Great Florida Reef, which is the largest reef in the continental U.S., is important to the tourist town. Banning these sunscreens was "the right thing to do," she said. Before the vote, both sides of the debate were presented, she said. Yet it seemed to her that there were sunscreens that would protect people as well as ocean life.

The mayor said she hopes the ban will also make people more aware. She said the city cannot keep visitors from bringing banned sunscreens to its beaches. However, it can discourage them.

"I hope it will make consumers more aware and responsible for their actions," Johnston said. The goal, she said, is for people to look at sunscreen ingredients and "make wise choices."

Last summer, Hawaii passed a law banning companies from selling and distributing sunscreens that have oxybenzone and octinoxate. The bill was opposed by some companies and business groups. Even some doctors opposed it. They worried it might discourage people from wearing sunscreen. Still, Governor David Ige signed the bill.

People Are Greatest Threat To Coral

Dying coral is a problem for ocean animals and humans. Coral reefs give a home to sea creatures. They also provide food, medication and tourism jobs for people. Their value has been estimated at \$30 billion to \$172 billion per year, says the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

"Unfortunately, people also pose the greatest threat to coral reefs," says the Smithsonian. Some dangers include too much fishing, pollution and warming.

Reefs suffer from coral bleaching due to warming sea temperatures. The higher temperatures have been linked to climate change. Earth's climate has heated up. It is connected to the burning of fossil fuels, including coal, oil and wood.

Bleached coral turns white and is more likely to die.

Some reefs have been destroyed, says the Smithsonian. In other places, "reefs today are a pale shadow of what they



once were."

Choose Reef-Friendly Options

The National Park Service asks people to choose "reef-friendly" sunscreens. Some have titanium oxide or zinc oxide. They are considered natural alternatives to the banned chemicals.

The park service says that people should use sunscreens. However, studies are finding that "some compounds in many sunscreens can harm the coral on our reefs."

People may not realize that sunscreens wash off in the water. It may not seem like a big deal. However, all that sunscreen adds up, the park service says. It says studies show that each year, "4,000 to 6,000 tons of sunscreen enter reef areas." The sunscreen does not spread out across the ocean. It stays around reefs in tourist areas.