

SUMMARY OF GRANT ACTIVITIES

As many studies have pointed out, overfishing and habitat destruction are two of the most serious threats to marine ecosystems. These and other human-caused impacts are widely recognized and increasingly being addressed by all sorts of public education efforts, but most of these efforts are directed toward fishing practices in general or shallow water coral reefs. "Fragile Forests of the Deep" is a documentary film aimed at educating the general public about deep water corals in general and the Oculina reefs off Florida's east coast in particular.

In October of 2005, I began by filming a week-long research trip mapping and studying Oculina reefs between Cape Canaveral and Ft. Pierce, Florida. I attempted to do this job as a pro bono project, because I knew at the time that there was no money available for filming, but when I began I was thinking in terms of a short film -- say, ten minutes long. As I got more into the issues, however, I realized that no one could do justice to this important subject in so short a time.

With the aid of this grant, I expanded my original material into a half-hour film that can be used as part of NOAA's outreach efforts. I travelled to the University of North Carolina and interviewed the NOAA scientist who was in charge of the mapping project and several other scientists doing research with corals. I flew covert night patrol missions with air crews patrolling the Oculina Banks. I tracked down NASA launch footage and Mars simulations, to make a comparison between mapping Mars and mapping the deep water reefs. I filmed the Vessel Monitoring System in St. Petersburg and interviewed the Director there.

The finished film shows people what the Oculina reefs look like. It features archival video from the initial 1976 exploration missions and side-by-side comparisons of some of these areas today, showing almost total obliteration of those reefs in many places. By explaining why they are important and by showing how and why they are being studied, the film is intended to promote the wise management and sustainable use of coral reef resources, and by revealing the damage that's being caused it will also help develop public concern about careless (and criminal) fishing practices. Fisher concerns are also represented in the film (in part by an interview with a fisher), which makes a case that it is in fishers' best interests to protect habitat which, in turn, produces more fish.

A hundred copies of the final DVD have been provided to NOAA for deep water coral education work. Free Speech TV, a satellite TV channel based in Denver, Colorado, has made a tentative commitment for national broadcast. Additional copies have been provided to NOAA's office of Law Enforcement in Titusville and to the Vessel Monitoring Service in St. Peterburg, Florida for their outreach and public information work.