Above the Surface—sunlight sparkling and dancing on blue waters; islands, long and narrow, floating offshore; green trees winding along the shoreline, and water lapping gently against sail and fishing boats and pleasure yachts. Down Below—brightly colored fishes swimming gracefully and sea plants swaying ceaselessly as the waters wash the many-colored corals.

All of these delights of the sea are yours to discover at Biscayne National Park, for the greater part of the park’s 42,120 hectares (104,000 acres) is water and reef. Here you can gain an understanding of a complex and fascinating geologic-biologic process—the building of a coral reef. Here, too, on the land and in the water, you can find communities of plants and animals of both the temperate and tropical zones.

Coral—the Magnificent Builders

These limestone reefs owe their existence to groups of animals and plants that build upon each other to form a protective shell. The park’s reefs are made up predominantly of the marine animal “coral,” both living and non-living. Corals (animals) also contribute to the process.

Lime building of the corals progresses best at temperatures of 20°C (68°F) and warmer. Besides warm water, corals require moving salt water, a firm foundation to start on (successing generations build on top of the limestone “houses” of their ancestors), and water no deeper than 80 feet (24 meters). Black reefs, which continue southward into John Pennekamp State Park and the southeastern United States, are generally shallower than 12 meters (40 feet). In a very real sense, many of the plants and animals exist here because the coral reefs provide them with food, protection, and domicile—close to their young. Indeed, the great variety of life in the coral reefs furnishes sustenance for all—those that prey and those preyed upon.

Even more vivid reminders are the shipwrecks lying below the depths of the Florida Current (Gulf Stream). Here you can gain an understanding of a complex and fascinating geologic-biologic process—the building of a coral reef. Here, too, on the land and in the water, you can find communities of plants and animals of both the temperate and tropical zones.

What to do at the Park

You can enjoy a variety of water-oriented sports here—primarily in or from a boat. Because no public boat transportation is provided, you must have either your own or a hired one to get you to the keys and anchor your boat. Stop first at park headquarters on Convoy Point—14.5 kilometers (9 miles) east of Homestead, Fla., on North Canal Drive—or at the ranger station on Elliott Key; park personnel can answer your questions and help you plan your visit.

Boating and fishing are the most popular pastimes. There’s a boat launching ramp near park headquarters at Convoy Point, and a small marina at Elliott Key Harbor. Fishing is permitted in accordance with Florida law; no fishing license is required for saltwater fishing.

Swimming, snorkeling, and scuba diving are also popular, and one of the most exciting things you can do here is investigate a typical patch reef. Four such reef areas, including one shipwreck, are marked by mooring buoys, where you can tie your boat and explore. These reefs are 3 to 5 kilometers (2 to 3 miles) east of Elliott Key and Old Rhodes Key; detailed information and maps are available at park headquarters and at the ranger station on Elliott Key.

Other interesting areas to explore are the creeks, narrow cuts, and channels between the keys, where mangroves usually grow down to the water’s edge. Their roots create strange and eerie underwater patterns. Be cautious of the strong tidal currents in these areas.

Because most of the shoreline in the park is exposed, rough, coral rock, there are few sandy beaches from which to swim. Also, there are no guarded swimming areas. Always be aware of ocean conditions: strong currents, waves, rip currents, and strong tides. The winds and weather conditions will affect the ocean’s safety. Do not swim when conditions are not suitable for swimming. The Florida Keys are very safe to enter, but they can be dangerous if care is not taken. Always be aware of ocean conditions and the weather.

Campsites and Picnicking in the Park

Camping, picnicking, and hiking are land activities you can enjoy on Elliott Key. Several marinas along the mainland coast are supplied with marinas. There is no freshwater available in the park. There is no freshwater. All water used must be brought in. The park does not provide any bottled or canned water for visitors. Boats Keep Out of Area Controlled

A U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device (PFD) must be aboard and easily available for each person. It’s best to leave a boat operator on board while others are in the water. Inexperienced divers are urged to obtain professional training and to learn well the guidelines of snorkeling and scuba diving.

Camping, picnicking, and hiking are land activities you can enjoy on Elliott Key.

Accommodations and Services

In the park, Facilities at Elliott Key Harbor, besides boat slips, include a range station with first aid, primitive campground (30-camp site), picnic area, interpretive trail, visitor center, restrooms, and saltwater showers. Gasoline is not available in the park. There is no freshwater. Outside the park, Meals, lodging, camping grounds, gasoline, and other supplies are available in Homestead. Many well-supplied marinas are located along the mainland coast and in the Florida Keys. Check your charts or ask a park ranger.

Nearby Places of Interest

Everglades National Park is about a half-hour drive south from Convoy Point Head­quarters. John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park can be reached by driving south on U.S. 1.

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

Biscayne National Park is administered by the National Park Service. U.S. Department of the Interior headquarters are at Convoy Point, 14.5 kilometers (9 miles) east of Homestead, Fla., the Superintendent’s address is P.O. Box 1369, Homestead, FL 33030.

As the Nation’s principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the widest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historic places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservations and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.