

Fort Jefferson

National Monument
Florida

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Kevin A. Peer

Largest Link in America's 19th-century Coastal Defenses

Like a strand of beads hanging from the tip of Florida, reef islands trail westward into the Gulf of Mexico. Almost 70 miles west of Key West lies a cluster of seven coral reefs called the Dry Tortugas, which, along with surrounding shoals and waters, make up Fort Jefferson National Monument. Though off the beaten track, the monument is famous for its bird and marine life, as well as for its legends of pirates and sunken gold. Its central feature, from which the monument derives its name, is Fort Jefferson, largest of the 19th-century American coastal forts.

Spanish explorer Ponce de Leon discovered these islands in 1513 and called them *Las Tortugas*—the Turtles—because of the great number of turtles he found there. (The later name, Dry Tortugas, warns the mariner that the islands contain no fresh water.) In the centuries that followed, many Spanish and British vessels cruising the Florida straits passed the Tortugas, braving both corsairs and shipwreck. Not until Florida became part of the United States in 1821 were the pirates finally driven out. Then in 1825 a lighthouse was built on Garden Key to alert sailors to rocky shoals that could bring a vessel to grief. Thirty-one years later, the present light on Loggerhead Key was erected.

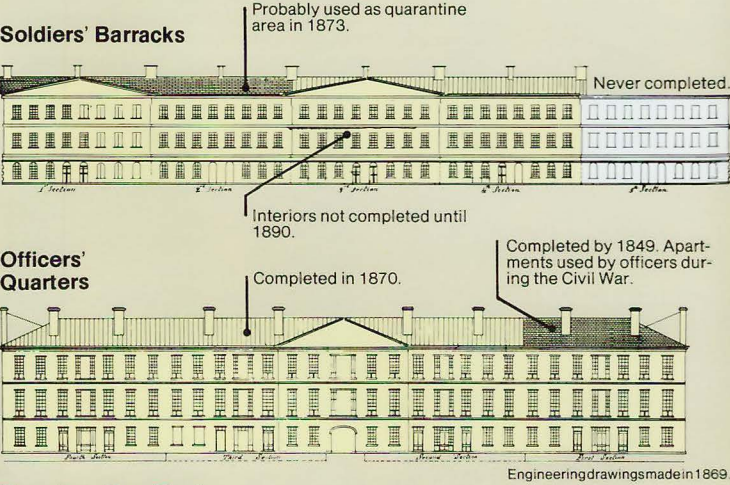
The strategic importance of the Tortugas was recognized early. Naval Lt. Josiah Tattnall, who surveyed the islands in 1829, pointed out that any nation occupying the Tortugas would control navigation to the Gulf. An enemy, seizing the islands, would threaten the growing Mississippi Valley commerce which sailed the Gulf to reach the Atlantic. It was for this reason that the U.S. War Department decided to fortify the Tortugas and ordered the construction of Fort Jefferson on Garden Key.

As it turned out, Fort Jefferson, one-half mile in perimeter, became the largest link in the chain of seacoast fortifications the United States undertook to build from Maine to Texas during the first half of the 1800s. From foundation to crown, its 8-foot-thick walls stand 50 feet high. Its three gun tiers were designed for 450 guns and it was large enough to garrison 1,500 men. Planned and supervised by the U.S. Corps of Engineers, the fort was started in 1846, and, although work continued for almost 30 years, it was never finished. Prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, most of the labor force consisted of artisans from the North and slaves from Key West. After 1861 the slaves were partly replaced by imprisoned Union deserters, but slave labor did not end completely until the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect in January 1863.

Federal troops occupied Fort Jefferson throughout the Civil War, but beyond firing a few shots at passing Confederate privateers, they saw no action. The average garrison numbered 500 men, who spent most of their time building quarters for themselves and their officers. Little important work was done after 1866, for the new rifled cannon introduced during the war had already made the fort obsolete. Moreover, in 1864 engineers making subsoil experiments confirmed that the fort's foundations rested not upon a solid coral reef, as had been thought, but upon sand and coral boulders washed up by the sea. The huge structure was settling and the walls began to crack.

During the Civil War, Fort Jefferson had served as a military prison for captured deserters. For almost 10 years after the fighting stopped, it remained a prison. Among the prisoners sent here in 1865 were four of

Garrison Quarters



Touring the Fort

The parade ground contains the ghostly remains of two huge buildings, the Officers' Quarters and Soldiers' Barracks, among the first structures begun after the fort

was established. The Officers' Quarters was complete by 1870. Because the Soldiers' Barracks was unfinished up to 1874 when the army abandoned the fort, more

than 1,000 soldiers had to build makeshift shelters in wooden sheds and gunrooms during the Civil War. Only the two foundations remain today.

the so-called "Lincoln Conspirators"—Michael O'Loughlin, Samuel Arnold, Edward Spangler, and Dr. Samuel Mudd—who had been tried and convicted of complicity in the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. The most famous of these was Dr. Mudd, a Maryland physician who, knowing nothing of Lincoln's murder, had set the broken leg of the fugitive assassin, John Wilkes Booth. Sentenced to life imprisonment, Mudd was pardoned in 1869 for helping to fight the 1867 yellow fever epidemic that struck the fort, felling 270 of the 300-man garrison and resulting in 38 fatalities. (The cell occupied by Dr. Mudd during his years of confinement can still be seen at the fort today.)

The Army finally abandoned Fort Jefferson in 1874 following a damaging hurricane and another fever outbreak. During the 1880s the American naval fleet used the surrounding waters periodically as an anchorage, and it was from Tortugas Harbor in January 1898 that the battleship *Maine* weighed anchor for Cuba where, one month later, she blew up in Havana Harbor. The Army stationed a few troops here during the Spanish-American War, and the Navy built a coaling station here in 1898. The fort also contained one of the first naval wireless stations. In 1908 this area became a wildlife refuge to protect the Sooty Tern Rookery which had almost been wiped out by egg collectors. During World War I the Tortugas were equipped to serve as a seaplane base, but this lasted only a few months. Then the brick fort many considered the "Gibraltar of the Gulf" was quietly abandoned to the winds and the birds and the sea. Rescued from oblivion by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1935 proclamation naming the area a national monument, Fort Jefferson stands today a small but proud part of America's national heritage.

☆ GPO: 1988-201-941/60159 Reprint 1988

Tortugas Support Myriad Marine and Plant Life

The warm, clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico and maximum available light combine to produce optimum conditions for the development of coral reefs in the shallow waters on the outer edge of offshore tropical islands. The true builders of coral reefs are small, primitive animals called polyps which, over the centuries, have accumulated in living colonies to form the rigid structures.

The Tortugas reef complex supports a wealth of marine life. Multicolored sea ferns sway in the gentle

Clear, shallow, warm waters—conditions necessary for the growth of coral reefs—also make it possible for snorkelers to obtain close-up views of the reefs and their accompanying sea life.



Staghorn coral

currents; sea anemones thrust their rose and lavender tentacles upward in search of food; a lobster's antennae wave frantically to detect danger. Other strange animals, including sponges of various sizes and colors, dot the sandy bottom. Clusters of staghorn coral form underwater "forests."

Though their numbers have diminished due to indiscriminate hunting, sea turtles—hawksbill, green, and loggerhead species—are still seen in the Dry Tortugas area. To enlarge the populations, green turtle hatchlings have been released by the thousands in Everglades National Park, Fort Jefferson National Monument, and throughout the Caribbean. Future releases are planned.



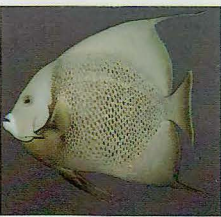
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Boaters will find safe anchorage in the Tortugas harbor. Visitors to the national monument enjoy good fishing, snorkeling, and touring the ruins of the historic fort.

Although a diversity of lower animal forms inhabits the reefs, the most dominant creatures are scores of vivid red, yellow, green, and blue reef fishes. The varied hues of the small, aggressive fishes provide camouflage, recognition, warning, and an aid to courtship. Amberjack, grouper, wahoo, and tarpon play an important ecological role by eating the smaller fish and keeping their numbers in check. All denizens of the reef must be constantly alert for the marauders of the sea—the ever-cruising shark and the swift barracuda. Atop the food chain, these predators maintain a natural balance in the marine habitat.

Fewer than 50 species of land plants are native to the Dry Tortugas; the saline soil, droughts, and frequent storms hinder growth. Some plants on Garden and Loggerhead Keys—the conspicuous coconut and date palms, tamarind, Australian pines, gumbo limbo, and century plants—have been introduced by accident or as ornament. The native flora is mainly mangrove (but-

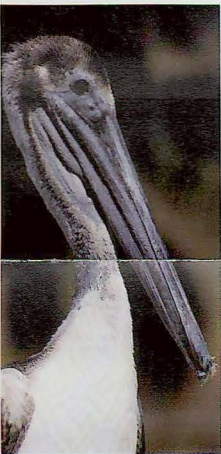
The abundance and diversity of sea creatures such as this gray angel-fish indicates that coral reefs in the Tortugas are healthy.



tonwood), bay cedar, seagrape, sea lavender, purslane, and sea oats—all typical of Florida's east coast.

Island Keys Lure a Variety of Migratory Birds

One of our great national wildlife spectacles occurs each year between April and September, when the sooty terns gather on Bush Key for their nesting season. The terns come by the thousands from the Caribbean Sea and west-central Atlantic Ocean. As early as mid-January, sooties begin conducting nocturnal maneuvers over the Tortugas, spending their days at sea. Presumably, mating occurs during this time, for when they land in March, egg-laying begins immediately. Their nests are no more than depres-



Brown pelicans, until recently an endangered species, have increased in number under protection in wildlife sanctuaries.

The double-crested cormorant uses its strong hook-tipped bill to catch fish underwater.

sions in the warm sand. The parents take turns shading their single egg from the sun. When the young are strong enough for continuous flight, the colony disperses.

The presence of these tropical oceanic birds at Tortugas was recorded as early as 1513 by Ponce de Leon. Today the rookery here contains an estimated 100,000 breeding adults. A colony of brown noddies,



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Thousands of sooty terns nest in the Tortugas and are easily spotted through binoculars from the fort. Visitors are prohibited from landing on Bush Key during the tern nesting season, from March through September.

interspersed among the sooties, comprises only about 2,500 birds, but the population is increasing. The two species share the ability to capture fish and squid from the water's surface while in flight. Large numbers of frigatebirds also congregate at the Dry Tortugas in summer. Its 7-foot wingspan makes it one of the most graceful of soaring birds. A few masked and brown boobies are observed occasionally. Roseate terns nest on Hospital, Bush, and Long Keys at the same time other terns are nesting. In season, a continuous

Fewer in number than the sooty terns, noddies are one of the few tern species to make their homes in low, scrubby shrubs and bushes. Here in the Tortugas, they nest in vegetation such as bay cedar and sea lavender.



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procession of songbirds and other migrants fly over or rest at the islands, which lie across one of the principal flyways from the United States to Cuba and South America. Familiar gulls and terns of the North, plus many migratory shore birds, winter at the Tortugas.

A Safe Visit Requires Preparation

Fort Jefferson is open during daylight hours only. Public transportation to the fort is available from Key West by boat and amphibious aircraft. Information on charter boats and flights can be obtained from the Key West Chamber of Commerce.

Seaplane approaches, landings, and takeoffs are limited to the area within a mile of the fort itself. Mooring of seaplanes is limited to the designated area at Garden Key. In summer, seaplanes must stay beyond 100 yards off Bush Key, which supports a nesting tern colony.

Since the Tortugas are isolated, you must provide for your own existence: no housing, water, meals, bathing facilities, or supplies are available. Grills and picnic tables are provided. Upon arrival, plan first to see the orientation slide program, then take the self-guiding tour.

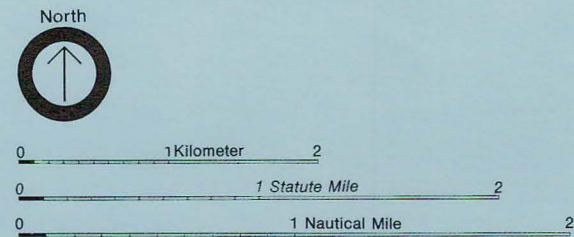
Snorkelers will find marine life concentrated around patches of live coral. Swimmers can explore the fascinating coral wonderland in only 3 or 4 feet of water. Coral formations and bright tropical fish provide excellent opportunities for underwater photography. Salt-water sport fishing is good most of the year; no fishing license is required. Regulations can be obtained from personnel stationed at the fort.

For more information about the monument, write to the Superintendent of Everglades National Park, Box 279, Homestead, FL 33030.



Private boaters have a prime opportunity to visit the fort. Nautical charts for the route can be purchased at marinas and boating supply outlets in Key West. Information can be obtained in Key West from the U.S. Coast Guard Station, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Charter Boat Association. Boaters should be aware of the possibility of extremely rough seas.

Fort Jefferson



Public Docking Policy

The docking facilities at Fort Jefferson National Monument are provided for the convenience of those people who wish to visit historic Fort Jefferson. They are also intended to facilitate Government operations associated with the management of the national monument. Visitors using the docking facilities are

required to observe the following regulations: Loading and unloading is permitted only at designated locations on the public dock • Mooring of private vessels is permitted at designated locations on the public dock for periods not to exceed two (2) hours between sunrise and sunset • Overnight mooring of private vessels to docks or

piers is prohibited • Mooring of private vessels along sections of the docks or piers designated for official Government use is prohibited.

The monument superintendent may waive any or all of the above regulations in an emergency that poses a threat of life or property.

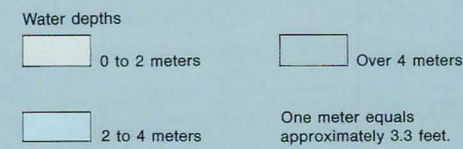
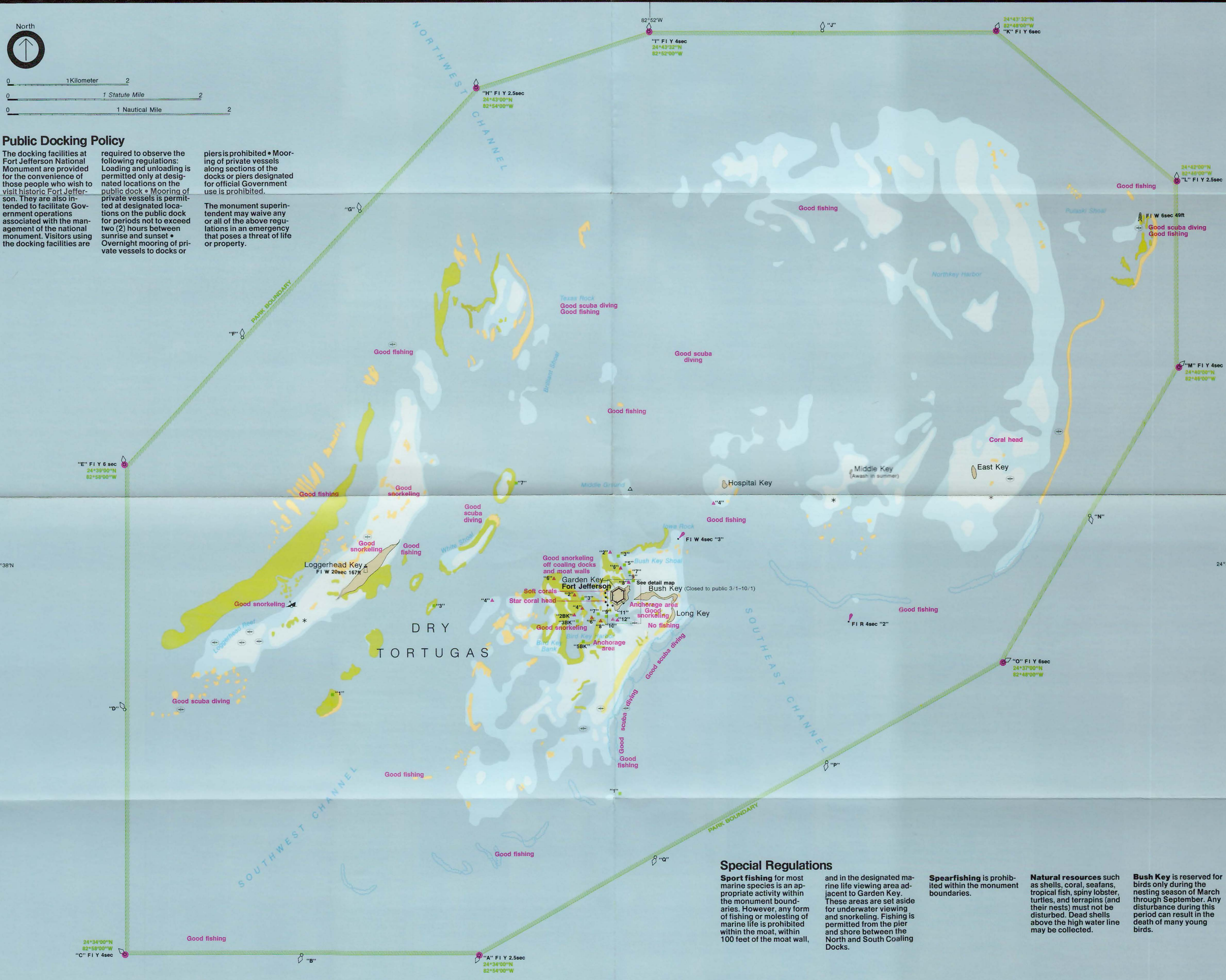
Note: Violations of park regulations will result in a citation to appear before the U.S. Magistrate.

Welcome to Fort Jefferson National Monument. We hope you will enjoy your visit. The National Park Service staff is here to help you. Please feel free to call upon them for information or assistance. We ask only that you help in preserving the

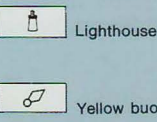
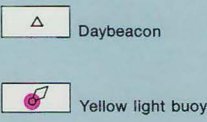
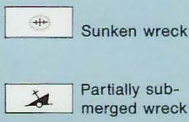
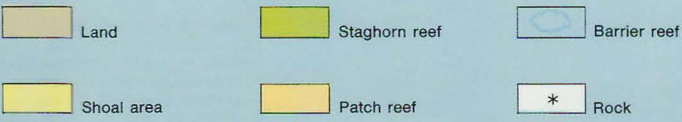
natural and historic resources of the monument. Camping and sleeping is permitted only in the designated campground area on Garden Key. Camping is limited to 30 days per calendar year. The dumping or throwing over-

board of bottles, cans, paper, or other trash on monument grounds or in monument waters is prohibited. Please be mindful of the dangers that exist in the park, such as loose mortar and brick, dangerous

wall edges, and marine life like sea urchins and fire coral.



This chart is an orientation aid for visitors to Fort Jefferson National Monument. It should not be used in place of National Ocean Service chart 11438, which is indispensable for safe boating on these waters.



Light characteristics

Fl Flashing

W White

R Red

Y Yellow

sec Period (in seconds)

Special Regulations

Sport fishing for most marine species is an appropriate activity within the monument boundaries. However, any form of fishing or molesting of marine life is prohibited within the moat, within 100 feet of the moat wall,

and in the designated marine life viewing area adjacent to Garden Key. These areas are set aside for underwater viewing and snorkeling. Fishing is permitted from the pier and shore between the North and South Coaling Docks.

Spearfishing is prohibited within the monument boundaries.

Natural resources such as shells, coral, sea fans, tropical fish, spiny lobster, turtles, and terrapins (and their nests) must not be disturbed. Dead shells above the high water line may be collected.

Bush Key is reserved for birds only during the nesting season of March through September. Any disturbance during this period can result in the death of many young birds.