

United Arab Emirates' \$3.5 Million Gift to United Way of Collier and the Keys Will Launch Major Reef Restoration Program in Florida Keys

-[Mission: Iconic Reefs](#) to Recover the Coral Reefs of the Florida Keys is one of the largest investments in reef restoration anywhere in the world-

-Gift part of larger pledge UAE made to Florida communities for Hurricane Irma recovery efforts-

February 26, 2020, Key Largo, Florida – Officials from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and [The United Way of Collier and the Keys](#) announced today that the UAE is granting \$3.5 million in funds to help restore seven iconic reefs in the Florida Keys. The donation will launch one of the largest investments in reef restoration in the world.

The gift is part of a larger \$10 million pledge to the state of Florida for Hurricane Irma relief efforts. United Way of Collier and the Keys will execute the gift's impact strategy in partnership with experts at the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) (NOAA) along with other local, state, national and international stakeholders. The majority of these funds will be made available through United Way to local reef restoration organizations to execute the critical reef restoration work.

"This is what friends do for each other in times of need. The UAE is delighted to be able to help the Florida Keys community in this special way and begin to restore its iconic coral reefs," said [Yousef Al Otaiba, UAE Ambassador to the United States](#). "We share the same planet and face the same challenges. That's why the UAE is so proud to collaborate with partners in the US and around the world to better protect and preserve vital ecosystems."

The United Way will oversee, manage, and distribute the grant as part of its continuing Hurricane Irma recovery programming and assistance. These will include projects to ensure the viability of the reef and thereby the financial stability of the Florida Keys community who depend upon it to provide over \$4.7 billion in annual revenue.

"We are honored to work with the Ambassador and the Embassy as a trusted partner and look forward to this valued partnership continuing," said Steve Sanderson, President and CEO of The United Way of Collier and the Keys. "This donation is truly transformative, providing for the asset-limited, hardworking families who are dependent on the reefs and marine life yet are still struggling from the effects of this devastating hurricane. We are so thankful for the outstanding collaboration through this gift. As part of the "Mission: Iconic Reefs" effort, what we are doing here and the knowledge we will gain will have a local as well as global impact."

When Hurricane Irma hit the Florida Keys in September 2017, it devastated the coral reef infrastructure which supports the diverse and economically-valuable marine ecosystem. The Florida Keys is home to the only barrier reef in North America, and approximately 60 percent of the Florida Keys' residents have an occupation that is dependent on the marine environment.

Over the last 40 years, coral reefs in the Florida Keys have suffered dramatic declines. Just two percent of healthy stony coral cover remains at each of the "Mission: Iconic Reefs" sites. NOAA and its partners have launched this \$97 million effort to restore these seven ecologically and culturally significant coral reefs within Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Informed by expertise from years of research and

successful trials, the 20-year mission represents one of the largest investments ever in coral restoration. The plan will ultimately revitalize the reefs to a healthy and sustainable 25 percent stony coral cover.

“Investments in pioneering restoration efforts like “Mission: Iconic Reefs” can be beneficial not just in the Florida Keys but also in reefs around the world, where corals suffer stress from human use, climate change, and other factors,” said Nicole LeBoeuf, acting director of NOAA's National Ocean Service. “By working together, we can create a lasting legacy in the Florida Keys and help support coral restoration efforts worldwide, in turn, providing economic security for communities that depend on healthy marine environments.”

Through complementary grants totaling \$700,000, the gift will also promote international climate exchanges and sharing of best practices as well as local educational opportunities. By encouraging local youth engagement, it will empower future generations to support restoration, sustainability, and conservation efforts; issues important to both Florida and the UAE. Additional details are outlined below.

“This wonderful humanitarian gift will galvanize the critical reef restoration work necessary to revitalize the reef upon which our Florida Keys community depends,” said Holly Raschein, Representative for Florida House District 120. “Even more so, the education efforts will create change by teaching young people, our next generation, to be stewards of our marine environment and by providing opportunities for their financial advancement. This stewardship is something our local community, and their future, depends on. We could not be more grateful for the United Way’s partnership with the UAE to improve our community.”

The UAE has an extensive record of helping US communities recover from natural disasters from New Orleans to New Jersey after Hurricanes Katrina (2005) and Sandy (2012), to Joplin, Missouri (2011), which was devastated by one of the strongest tornadoes ever recorded in the US. More recently, the UAE has supported recovery efforts in Collier County to restore Grace Place Children and Families’ playgrounds, hard court and soccer field, and improve its technology infrastructure and food pantry. The funds are also providing needed repairs to hurricane-damaged homes of disadvantaged families throughout the Golden Gate community. The UAE is currently working with the United Way and Collier County Public Schools in the Everglades City and Immokalee areas to provide Wi-Fi for underserved youth to support future success.

Coral Restoration Learning Exchange

The gift will use part of its funds to develop a Coral Restoration Learning Exchange Program between the UAE and the [Coral Restoration Consortium \(CRC\)](#). The CRC is comprised of coral restoration scientists and educators dedicated to enabling coral reef ecosystems to thrive in the future.

Advancing Innovation for Global Reef Restoration

Part of the gift will give the UAE the opportunity to be a co-presenting sponsor for the Reef Futures 2021 Conference, to be held in Key Largo, Florida, in May 2021.

Creating the Next Generation of Reef Stewards

Less than half of the Monroe County School District schools have dedicated marine-related educational programs. The UAE’s gift will bring this programming to schools and provide access to marine science education to 8,500 local school children. The funds will also allow students to engage at local marine educational facilities.

UAE Marine Science Educational Advancement

The gift is establishing a scholarship fund sponsored by the UAE for youth from Monroe County, Florida, who are pursuing degrees in marine science and related fields.

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NOTE: additional video resources and b-roll about the gift can be accessed here

[\[www.uwcollier.org/keysreefs\]](http://www.uwcollier.org/keysreefs)

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About The United Way of Collier and the Keys

The United Way of Collier and the Keys (“UWCK”) is committed to investing in and working to create a community where all individuals and families in Collier and Monroe Counties have an opportunity to thrive and achieve their full potential. We will accomplish this through improving education, economic stability and health, as well as providing access to food and safety net services. We work to create communities where all individuals and families have the opportunity to thrive. We invest financially and educationally to support the asset limited hardworking paycheck to paycheck population. A volunteer-driven organization, we connect volunteers in the community and deliver information and referral services. We bring the collective power of people and organizations together partnering with hundreds of volunteers and local agencies.

About the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE is a source of stability, tolerance, innovation and growth in the Arabian Gulf and around the world. The [United States and the UAE are close friends and strong allies](#), working together to promote regional security, create economic prosperity, and address pressing global challenges. The UAE is the largest export market for US goods in the Middle East and more US naval vessels visit UAE ports than any other port outside the United States. Cultural, educational, commercial, and medical partnerships between the UAE and US are spurring innovation, inspiring creativity, and increasing understanding in both countries. More information can be found at www.uae-embassy.org and @UAEEmbassyUS.

About the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

NOAA is celebrating 50 years of science, service, and stewardship in fulfilling a mission to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and

manage our coastal and marine resources. Join us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and our other [social media channels](#). Visit our [news and features page](#).