National Conservation Council
Cayman Islands

National Conservation Council
Guidance Notes on Handling Starfish

Introduction

The National Conservation Act, administered by the National Conservation Council, aims to promote and secure biological diversity and the sustainable use of natural resources in the Cayman Islands. The starfish of the Cayman Islands, particularly the Red Cushion or West Indian sea star (*Oreaster reticulatus*) at Starfish Point in the North Sound of Grand Cayman, are a beloved natural tourism and recreational resource to the Cayman Islands. Echinoderms including starfish, sea eggs/urchins, sea cucumbers and sand dollars are protected species and may not be taken from Cayman waters at any time.

While starfish (and some other Echinoderms) are known for their ability to withstand temporary removal from seawater and even the loss of limbs, such rough handling – as with any animal – would disturb and harass, if not outright injure it. Repeated or extreme mishandling of starfish can even kill them. Chronic mishandling can also result in damage which is not obvious to external observation and can cause starfish leave an area, such as Starfish Point.

While 'no touch' observation is always recommended, we recognise the public interest for education, commerce, and enjoyment in physically interacting with West Indian sea star at Starfish Point. It is therefore in the best interest of our starfish and the general public who wish to continue to view and interact with these animals sustainably and responsibly, to ensure that safe and gentle handling is practiced.

The following Guidance Notes are issued to help clarify safe handling practice of the West Indian sea star at Starfish Point which respects their status as both a protected species and a natural resource of the Cayman Islands.

Allowed Handling

Under the National Conservation Act, 2013, 'take' means to "collect, hunt, kill, destroy, damage, injure, disturb, harass, harm, wound, capture, molest or impede a live specimen in any way or to attempt to do so, and includes incidental taking".

Department of Environment Conservation Officers will apply discretion and not consider the following activities as 'take' under the law ONLY when practiced with the West Indian sea star at Starfish Point.

This does not apply to any other Echinoderms and does not apply at any other locations.

- Positioning the West Indian sea star flat, **while fully submerged under water**, and supported in a person's hands. The starfish may also be inverted to observe its feet.

National Conservation Council
Cayman Islands

Handling Restrictions

The following restrictions ARE considered as 'take' when handling starfish or any other Echinodermata anywhere in the Cayman Islands and are a prosecutable offense:

- Do not elevate any part of the starfish out of or above the water.
- Do not bend any part of the starfish in any direction, including manipulating its arms.
- Do not hold the starfish by its feet, or insert anything into any part or opening of the animal.
- Do not interact with the starfish in such a manner as to break or pierce the outer skin of the starfish.
- Do not interact with the starfish in such a manner as to wound it, i.e., break off or otherwise cause a foot or arm to become separated from the main body, wholly or partially.

Best Practice Reef Safe Sunscreen

Apply sunscreen well in advance of handling or interacting with any marine life, including starfish (or any other Echinodermata).

Always use reef safe sunscreen with zinc oxide or titanium dioxide and non-nanoparticles.

Other active ingredients in sunscreens such as oxybenzone are toxic or otherwise stressful to marine life, including stingrays, starfish and corals, even in very low concentrations.

Red Cushion or West Indian sea star (*Oreaster reticulatus*)

Conclusion

Anyone who witnesses activity they feel is in violation of these Guidance Notes is encouraged to report this to the Department of Environment as soon as possible by calling 916-4271 or emailing DoE@gov.ky.

If possible, please take a photo or video of the observed activity noting the date, time, and location. Additional information about the suspected offender is also essential and can include the name of vessel, company, and/or persons involved. DoE Conservation Officers will then assess the information and determine how to address the situation.

If providing a photo or video please ensure:

- The image is clear
- Time, date and location data is embedded in the picture's metadata if possible

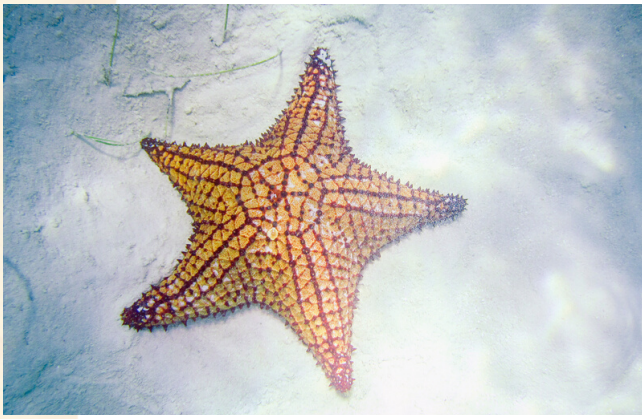
All information regarding suspected marine offences provided to the DoE will be kept strictly confidential.

Additional Resources

Click link to access

NCC Legislation page with the National Conservation Act & Regulations including the Marine Parks Regulations

www.conservation.ky/the-national-conservation-law



Red Cushion or West Indian sea star (*Oreaster reticulatus*)

Copyright NCC 2022