

NATURAL WONDERS

Love On The Rocks

(NAPSA)—Since 1990, researchers have been examining a fascinating phenomenon at the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary off the Texas-Louisiana coast—mass coral spawning.

Seven or eight evenings after the August or September full moon, between approximately 8:30 and 10:30 p.m., at least seven different species of coral reproduce by releasing their gametes into the water. Biologists say this rare sight looks something like an upside-down, underwater snowstorm. The mass spawning phenomenon is but one of many fascinating facts about coral.

Coral reefs are not only among the most spectacular of underwater environments, they're also among the most important for humans. Fortunately, many of America's coral systems are protected by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Sanctuary Program.

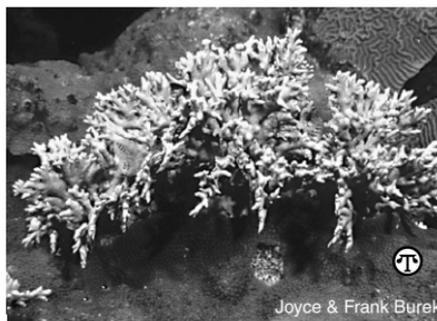
Coral reefs cover less than one percent of the ocean floor, but support an estimated 25 percent of all marine life.

They provide:

- **Medicine.** Coral reefs offer unique compounds that are part of treatments of cardiovascular disease, ulcers, leukemia and skin cancer as well as bone grafting material and AZT, an important medicine for fighting HIV infection. The medication is based on chemicals extracted from a Caribbean reef sponge.

- **Food.** Coral reefs support the fish and plant life that support millions of people.

- **Recreation.** Coral reefs are not only great places to play



Love on the rocks: Coral spawning in the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary.

for divers, anglers and boaters, the reefs protect beaches from erosion.

- **Habitat for rare species.** Coral reefs are known as high-density locations of biodiversity. That means the variety of species living on a coral reef is greater than almost anywhere else in the world.

Coral reef ecosystems are complex, dynamic and sensitive systems. Although they have persisted through major climatic shifts, they are sensitive to small environmental disturbances over the short-term. Slight changes in one component of the ecosystem affect the health of other components and the well-being of people everywhere.

In addition to the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, there are 12 other national marine sanctuaries representing a wide variety of ocean environments that protect nearly 18,000 square miles of ocean waters and habitats, and encourage research, educational, and outreach activities as well as fishing and boating.

To learn more, log on to www.sanctuaries.nos.noaa.gov.