Coral reefs and hardbottom habitats

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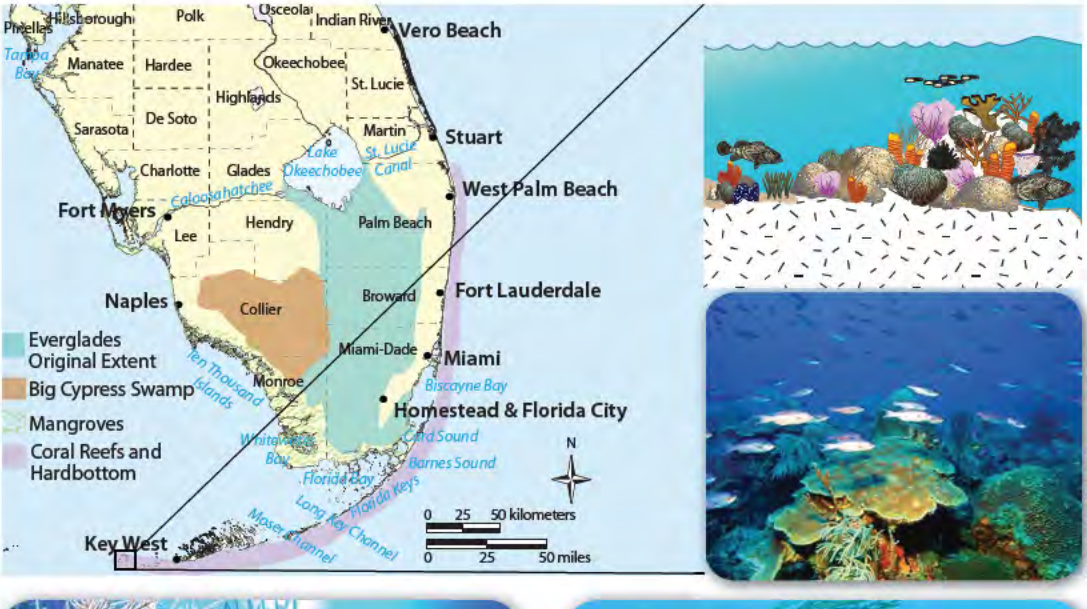
Coral reefs and hardbottom habitats are found throughout south Florida. Coral reefs are formed by reef-building corals that grow into vertical formations that provide habitat for a diverse flora and fauna that rivals tropical rainforests in biodiversity. Bank reefs occur at the continental margin in the Florida Keys and may consist of spur-and-groove formations. Patch reefs are small, roughly circular reefs that occur in nearshore waters. Coral reefs are important to the local economy and generate income by attracting tourists and supporting recreational and commercial fisheries. The Florida Keys Reef Tract is the only shallow water, tropical coral reef ecosystem in the continental United States. Hardbottoms are widely distributed and consist of limestone substrate that offers attachment sites for a variety of sea life, including sponges, soft corals, stony corals, bryozoans, and algae. Hardbottoms lack the vertical structure of reefs and are an important habitat for life stages of many organisms that make their way to coral reefs as adults.



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Stony corals (left forefront) and soft corals (right) grow on the reefs and provide habitat for various life stages of fish and other marine animals.