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**\*For Immediate Release\***

***South Florida Organizations Partner to use Human Occupied Submersibles to Raise Awareness about Impending Reef Damage near Port Everglades Prior to Dredging***

Miami Waterkeeper and Project Baseline team up to highlight the potential for reef damage during the upcoming Port Everglades dredging and expansion project. The groups will conduct unprecedented SCUBA and human occupied submersible operations, establishing and publicizing critical baseline record of current reef conditions. Media and special guests are encouraged to experience reefs first hand as submersible passengers.

Fort Lauderdale, FL. – Miami Waterkeeper and Project Baseline are teaming to host a two-day event, March 21-22, 2016 to increase understanding and awareness of coral reef conditions near Port Everglades. During the event, scuba and submersible divers will collect valuable baseline data from sections of the Florida Reef Tract just south of the Port Everglades shipping channel. Event highlights include special guest appearance on March 21st by renowned explorer, conservationist and TV personality, Philippe Cousteau and an evening social aboard Baseline Explorer to close out the event, docked at Pier 66 in Fort Lauderdale, which is open to the public with food and wine sponsored in part by Whole Foods – Aventura store on March 22<sup>nd</sup>.

In a race to expand U.S. ports to accommodate larger, next-generation shipping vessels, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is targeting ports along the eastern seaboard for expansion and dredging. The Port of Miami was first on the list, where the shipping channel bisects a once-thriving coral reef and critical habitat for threatened staghorn corals. Since construction began in November 2013, our reefs have been smothered by sediment from the dredging resulting in severe damage of over 250 acres of reef, including hundreds of ESA-listed staghorn corals. In response, Miami Waterkeeper (MWK), along with three other co-plaintiffs, filed a citizen suit in October 2014 to enforce legally-mandated protections for these imperiled corals through the Endangered Species Act.

History is about to repeat itself as the Army Corps of Engineers has taken no steps to alter its Environmental Impact Statement, recently sent to Congress for funding, to ensure that the same disaster doesn't happen again when dredging for shipping channel expansion at Port Everglades takes place, just 30 miles north of Port Miami. The Port Everglades shipping channel also bisects the Florida reef tract placing coral communities at risk from similar impacts. So far the dredging plan does not include to provisions to prevent the same kind of reef destruction that occurred in Miami.

Coral reefs are invaluable ecosystem architects, providing coastline protection from storm surges, supporting valuable fishing and recreation industries, and creating some of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the world. The Florida Reef Tract is the only living reef tract in the continental United States and the third largest barrier reef ecosystem in the world. Unfortunately, corals in this region have declined by 80-90% since the 1970's. In particular, staghorn corals, one of the first corals listed on the Endangered Species Act, which have declined by 98%. It's likely that hundreds of these important and threatened corals were illegally killed during the Port of Miami dredging.

Miami Waterkeeper and our partners seek to avoid the same reef damage in Port Everglades by incorporating "lessons learned" from the Miami Project. By raising awareness and including qualified volunteer divers in the monitoring of these reefs areas, we hope to catch reef damage faster and to build a unified voice focused on stopping it.

“Our goal is to involve the community in the protection of these reefs to avoid the same kind of destruction as we saw in during the expansion of the Port of Miami.” said Rachel Silverstein, Executive Director and Waterkeeper of Miami Waterkeeper. “The partnership with Project Baseline is an ideal way to highlight the beauty and value of Florida’s reefs while utilizing citizen science and community partnerships.”

Project Baseline, a nonprofit organization engaging a global effort to establish environmental baselines for marine and freshwater environments at depths to 1,000’, brings a unique array of diving and documentation assets in support of Miami Waterkeeper’s mission. The *Baseline Explorer* is a 146’ privately owned research vessel that supports Project Baseline by pairing capable volunteer divers with human occupied observation submersibles to engage collaborative scientific and conservation projects in the Atlantic and bordering seas.

“The people who don’t dive and don’t experience the water the way we do need to understand the impact of what’s going on from what we do in our everyday lives and how it’s affecting two-thirds of the planet” says Robert Carmichael, a long-time diver, and co-owner and operator of Baseline Explorer.

During the two-day diving and outreach event near Port Everglades, Baseline Explorer serves as a mobile dive platform for advanced scuba dive teams from Global Underwater Explorers to document particular reef areas and to monitor their changes over time. Simultaneously, human occupied submersible operations will record video of the coral communities encountered using high-resolution cameras. Baseline Explorer will launch two Triton 1000/2 ABS Classed Human Occupied Submersibles (rated to 1,000’) and one DeepFlight Dragon personal submarine. The Dragon, an all-electric, two-person craft enables passengers to fly and hover above features of interest. Both submersibles are valuable tools that provide access to underwater environments for media personnel, scientific researchers, policy makers and environmental management representatives enabling a fully integrated underwater experience for passengers.

In addition to logistical support, Project Baseline shares documentation results with the public in an accessible manner by describing the underwater environments to the public across the spectrum of online outlets. Select images and video segments collected from the dives will be incorporated into Project Baseline’s online database of global aquatic conditions.

**About Miami Waterkeeper:** Miami Waterkeeper (MWK, formerly Biscayne Bay Waterkeeper) is a Miami-based 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that advocates for South Florida’s watershed and wildlife. Our goal is to educate locals and visitors about the vital role of clean water in Miami’s clean water economy, and to empower them to take an active role in community decision making. We hope to ensure a clean and vibrant, water-based coastal culture and ecosystem for generations to come. We are a member of the Waterkeeper Alliance, an internationally recognized, citizen-led alliance working for clean water around the world. Launched in 2011, MWK is the first Waterkeeper in South Florida and the only advocacy organization solely dedicated to protecting Biscayne Bay and its surrounding watershed. Visit [miamiwaterkeeper.org](http://miamiwaterkeeper.org).

**About Project Baseline:** Project Baseline, supported by Global Underwater Explorers and the research vessel Baseline Explorer, was founded in 2009 to empower a global network of highly skilled scuba divers (more than 275 and growing) in 25 countries to create a lasting visual legacy of underwater conditions in oceans, lakes, rivers, springs, and caves all over the world, one picture and video at a time. For more information, visit [projectbaseline.org](http://projectbaseline.org).

**About Baseline Explorer:** The Baseline Explorer is classed as a private research vessel, owned and operated by Global Sub Dive since the start of 2015. The ship is 146’ long with a 36’ beam and is equipped with two human occupied submersibles, a recompression chamber, and gas compressors to support advanced diving operations to depths of 1,000’. To date, Global Sub Dive has supported marine research by teaming with three universities in Florida, the Azores, and Portugal. For more information, visit [globalsubdive.com](http://globalsubdive.com).

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