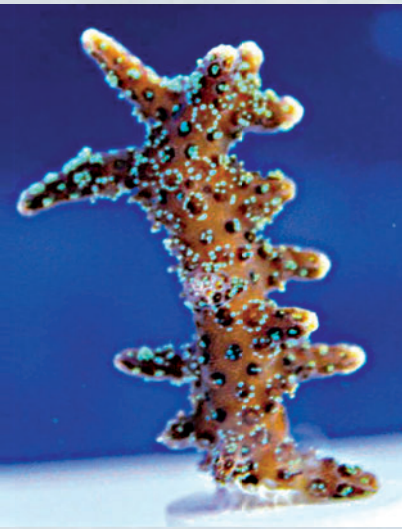


You're on your way to the Caribbean, surely drawn to the region by sunny skies and natural beauty both above and below the sea. Like most savvy beach goers, you've probably come armed with a combination of hats, sun shirts, and sunscreen to protect yourself from harmful rays. But the very sunscreen you use to shield yourself from those sunny skies could be detrimental to the vibrant marine life that attracted you in the first place.

The U.S. Virgin Islands is at the forefront of a global movement to protect coral reefs from the bleaching that can occur with exposure to three ingredients commonly found in sunscreens—oxybenzone, octinoxate, and octocrylene. USVI Governor Albert Bryan Jr. signed into law in 2019 a ban of sunscreen containing those three ingredients following similar legislation in Hawaii, Bonaire, Key West, and elsewhere.

Chemical sunscreens work by absorbing the sun's UV rays then dissipating them through a chemical reaction, while mineral sunscreens with ingredients like zinc oxide and titanium dioxide act as a physical barrier. The ugly truth is that even some sunscreens that advertise themselves to be reef safe still contain one or more of those three toxic Os, meaning it's up to the consumer to read the label to ensure the continued preservation of your beautiful destination.



Protect your skin—and the ocean



*Top: Healthy coral
Above: The same coral
14 days after
oxybenzone
exposure*

“Unfortunately, oxybenzone, octinoxate, and octocrylene don't stay on top of the skin,” says Harith Wickrema, president of Island Green Living, a St. John nonprofit that's been leading the charge on safe sunscreen education. “They can disrupt hormones and cause cell damage and severe allergic reactions. They also wash off people's bodies when they swim and cause coral bleaching, leading to 'zombie' coral which is unable to reproduce.”

Coral reefs are considered to have the highest biodiversity of any of the planet's ecosystems and are vital to marine life and protecting coastlines. They also attract countless snorkelers and scuba divers each year to destinations around the world, helping to fuel tourism while providing an otherworldly experience for those who find peace floating among their colorful beauty. Even former President Bill Clinton, who's visited the USVI numerous times as part of Clinton Global Initiative post-disaster recovery events, lauds the USVI ban, which goes into effect March 30, 2020.

“Removing harmful sunscreen chemicals from heavily populated areas gives the coral reefs a chance to recover,” says mineral

sunscreen manufacturer Stream2Sea CEO Autumn Blum in her testimony before the Virgin Islands Legislature. “It's still a little early to formally document the reef's recovery, but we're hearing numerous reports that reefs in Hawaii are showing signs of improvement resulting from increased sunscreen awareness, even before the bans take effect.”

What does this mean for you? You'll need to get a little more creative with your sun protection. Check out the many reef safe sunscreen choices, including products from companies like Stream2Sea, or some formulas offered by Banana Boat, Coppertone, and other major manufacturers. Do some research before you buy by perusing the Environmental Working Group's sunscreen rating system, or reading more about the issue at Island Green Living's website, www.islandgreenliving.org. You could even forego sunscreen altogether in favor of protective clothing.

Enjoy the sun and all the ocean has to offer by reading the label to verify your sunscreen's ingredients before you buy. Say no to the three toxic Os—oxybenzone, octinoxate, and octocrylene—to protect yourself and the beautiful undersea world.