

On January 1, 2020, the Republic of Palau will become the first country in the world to ban reef-toxic chemical sunscreens. These products, which include chemicals like oxybenzone, octocrylene, triclosan, and parabens, have been shown in scientific studies to have negative impacts on reef ecosystems, and even to cause coral bleaching.

Palau was particularly influenced by a 2017 UNESCO report from the Coral Reef Research Foundation, which found sunscreen chemicals including oxybenzone in the golden jellies of world-famous Jellyfish Lake. That report identified 11 specific sunscreen chemicals, with a recommendation that they be banned from use in or near the iconic marine lake. This recommendation formed the core of Palau's legislation, which prohibited all 11 chemicals and empowered the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Environment, and Tourism to add other ingredients as identified by future research.

The legislation permits any reef-toxic sunscreen to be confiscated, with possible civil penalties for persons selling such products, or importing them for sale.

Concerning the bill's benefit to tourism, Palau President Tommy E. Remengesau, Jr., remarked that "We are very lucky in Palau, because our residents, our visitors, and our friends all care deeply about the ocean. When science tells us that a practice is damaging to coral reefs, to fish populations, or to the ocean itself, our people take note and our visitors do too.

"The harmful effects of chemical sunscreen are well-documented by scientists around the world, and that includes our local experts. Toxic sunscreen chemicals have been found throughout Palau's critical habitats, and in the tissues of our most famous creatures. When divers, snorkelers, fishermen, naturalists... all the people from around the world who love Palau, when these people hear about our sunscreen ban they understand. Our reefs, our fish, and our ecosystems are their priority as well.

"We understand that some places aren't as fortunate as Palau. Not every tourist destination has the same educated audience as we do. That's why we don't mind being the first nation to ban these chemicals, and we will do our part to spread the word. With better education and awareness, more jurisdictions will have the confidence to take this necessary action. The science is clear, and once that message has spread, we will be the first of many."

Reef-safe sunscreens are permitted in Palau, and the government is planning several measures to promote their use. Palau hopes its new ban will further publicize these environmentally-friendly products, and help boost their use in other jurisdictions as well. President Remengesau noted one reef-safe product, "Pura Vida Palau," which is already being produced by a young Palauan entrepreneur.

The sunscreen ban came into law as part of Palau's 2018 Responsible Tourism Education Act, which included several provisions to educate tourists and encourage environmentally-conscious sightseeing.