

CORAL REEF

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CORAL REEF

Introduction

The seas of the tropical regions, where the water temperature is around 25 degrees, are an ideal environment for the madrepora: this name is used to indicate different varieties of animals, formed by hundreds of small polyps, belonging to the coelenterate type, that live in colonies with calcareous structures that branch into many different shapes. Many coral species live together and form a shelter for a large number of sea inhabitants such as the clownfish, surgeonfish, gigantic molluscs, crustaceans, triggerfish and sea urchins are a few of the creatures that populate the coral barrier.

Coral reef biome

The barrier reef or simply "reef" is one of the ecosystems with the highest number of species in the world. It is a wide and massive calcareous formation of animal origins with myriad colours and shapes. Responsible for the building of this biome are madreporic anthozoa, also known as the "builder corals".

Corals or madrepores are composed of small polyps of differing sizes (from few mms to a few cms) surrounded by a calcareous calyx called "corallite" which looks different according to the species. Each polyp hosts unicellular algae called "zooxanthellae", which give them a brown-greenish colour. This particular combination is called "mutualism", i.e. both species benefit from living together. The algae, through the **photosynthesis of the chlorophyll**, supply the polyp with energy in the form of sugars, produce oxygen and remove carbon dioxide (which could form carbonic acid and damage the calcareous skeleton of the polyps). In return, the polyp offers protection to the microscopic and numberless algae. Every square centimetre of the madrepora can contain up to one million zooxanthella algae.

The reefs are composed of calcium carbonate (CaCO_3) used by the coral polyps to build their own Coral formations develop mostly between the water surface and a depth of thirty metres. They need three environmental conditions to grow:

- a mean water temperature above 20°C in winter;
- constant salinity;
- plenty of light.

Only in these specific conditions can the corals grow and reproduce. Some species (such as the brain coral) grow between 5 and 25 mms a year, others (such as the antler coral) grow much quicker, up to 10-20 cm a year. The reef is an ever-growing ecosystem since new polyps grow on the old ones that die and so the surface area is always composed of live corals.

The coral reef in the world

Reefs are only in the Tropical seas and cover a total of approximately 600,000 km². The areas with the largest reefs are three:

- the Caribbean;

- the western islands of the Indian Ocean;
- the Asian-Pacific area.

The latter area is the richest in corals species, with peaks in the Indonesian islands, the Philippines and Northern Australia, while the Indian Ocean and the Pacific have fewer species. There is no relation between the number of coral species and the size of the reef; most of the massive reefs and atolls of Polynesia consist of less than fifty species, versus over five hundred in the Borneo or the Philippines.

Coral inhabitants

Extraordinary algae and plants. The coral structure offers a surprising variety of habitats for plants and animals. In addition to the algae that live within corals, the vegetal world also includes a large number of red algae, such as the encrusting alga *Porolithon* of the Asian Pacific area or some green algae, such as the *Caulerpa*. It has been calculated that 1-5 kgs of algae per square metre are produced every year in the reef. Lagoons and sheltered sandy areas are also home to such water plants as the *Thalassodendron*, which forms underwater prairies like those of the Mediterranean *Posidonia*, a plant loved by sea turtles as well.

Colourful inhabitants of the reef. Very many are the herbivore animals feeding on the plants that grow in the reef: sea urchins, crustaceans, molluscs and a number of species of fish. Parrot fishes (so called for their strong beak-shaped mouth) and surgeon fishes (so called due to the presence of a lamella as sharp as a scalpel on their tail) are the main herbivores. The mouth of the parrot fish is specialised in taking seaweed off the coral surface, leaving unmistakable marks of their passage. In this way, they also take off the surface layer of the calcareous skeleton, which, undigested, is then expelled in the form of coral sand. Other big coral eaters are the prickly starfish *Acanthaster*; if many individuals of this species concentrate in one area, they can seriously damage the reef. The sea worm *Hermodice carunculata* that lives in the Caribbean can devour one square centimetre of coral in an hour; the lionfish too (such as flag lionfish) mainly feed on coral polyps and other small animals they find amidst the cracks and hideouts that the barrier offers. These fishes have small protruding mouths that, like tweezers, can reach into the narrowest cracks. Many other fishes have mouths like these, such as the angelfish, the beautiful *Zanclus canescens* (similar to the lionfish), some file fishes and many others, all predators of small invertebrates. The crossbow fish, the globefish and the porcupine fish take off pieces of coral, instead, using their strong mouths. There are also coral fishes that feed on plankton or waste; but most are predators. Large animals are in the open sea, in front of the reef, such as the large green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), very many species of sharks and the devilfish (*Manta birostris*).

Odd invertebrates. This particular ecosystem also includes colourful and quirky invertebrates. Sponges certainly are one of the most important invertebrates of the reef. They feed on food particles carried by the water which are filtered through many tiny pores. The larger holes are instead the so-called "oscula", from which the animal drains filtered water. The reef sponges exhibit incredibly different shapes, sizes and colours. There are very many holothurians, also known as "sea cucumbers" because of the shape of their body, with species that can be over one metre long or



short and colourful. Starfishes are also brightly coloured in this ecosystem, for instance the garish blue purple *Linkia esatentacolata*.

Different barriers

We generally speak of "reefs", but this term is general. There are instead a number of coral formations with different origins, shapes and relations to the mainland.

Surf barriers. Surf barriers look like coral belts parallel to the coast; they get bigger as they are farther out to the sea and are linked to the coast by an internal flat reef. Its actively growing part is in the area of the barrier that looks onto the open sea because the environmental conditions (light, oxygen, food) there are more favourable to the growth of corals; on the contrary, the shallowness of the internal areas increase the temperature, salinity and the sediments that reduce the growth of the corals. Surf barriers are typically to be found in most coastal reefs in the Red Sea, Eastern Africa and the Caribbean.

Shelf barriers. Shelf barriers develop parallel to the coast, but, unlike surf barriers, are not linked to it. They can also be in the open sea and grow in all directions, with different shapes. They start to grow as small barriers; then, the seabed starts to sink so the corals may grow vertically. When completely developed, this type of barrier may extend into a grid of reefs and islets, separated by lagoons and canals formed by the currents, waves and winds. Barriers like these can be found in Australia, for instance the Great Reef, in Papua-New Guinea, off the New Caledonian coast, in the Fiji Islands and off the coasts of Belize and Bahamas.

Atolls. The term 'atoll' means a coral formation encircling a round lagoon; the term actually comes from the Maldivian "atholu" which means "islands arranged in a ring". These madreporic structures generally occur in deep oceanic waters at the level of ancient submerged volcanic islands. Most atolls are in the Pacific, but there are some in the Indian Ocean as well. Some countries consist only of atolls, for instance the Maldives.

Invaluable richness

The "reef" biome serves many different functions. Barriers are actually the ideal place for fries (i.e. the young fish before adulthood) to be born and grow, then they will become the population of adult fish that will be fished in the oceans across the world. In developing countries, 20-25% of the catch (approximately 10 million tons a year) live in reefs. In the Pacific area, 90% of people's protein intake comes from fishing on the reef. In Asia, the lives of one billion people depend on the fish living in the reef. It has been calculated that, if properly managed, just one square kilometre of reef could supply approximately 15 tons of fish and other food every year.

Corals could be useful in other fields as well, for instance medicine. The first studies on corals proved that one half of the new anticancer drugs could be extracted from these marine organisms. Another important function of corals is the protection of the coasts. The structure of the reef actually mitigates the violence of the tropical waves and hurricanes. Without this protection, the coasts would be damaged, and the fish and prawn farming which is spreading in Tropical countries would be destroyed. The real wealth of the reef is however **biodiversity**. Until today, approximately 4,000



species of fish and 800 species of coral have been classed, and it has been calculated that between 1 and 9 million species of vertebrates and invertebrates live in or somehow benefit from the reef. The naturalistic value of this ecosystem cannot yet be estimated in economic terms, but researchers are certain that the loss of species, that in the reef has been estimated to reach one million species over the next 40 years, will affect the stability of the ecosystems and therefore man's life.

The origin of coral reefs

The oldest finds of reefs date back to approximately 500 million years ago. Back then, waters with a mean temperature of 20°C could be found up to a latitude of 40-45 degrees north and south. In the Palaeozoic age (560-290 million years ago), reefs covered a surface of 5 million square kilometres and had an extremely high rate of vertical growth (up to 200 ms per million years). Approximately 360 million years ago, there was a period of approximately 4 million years during which reefs were reduced to 1,000 square kilometres, disappearing nearly everywhere.

The causes of this change were the decrease in the earth's temperature and the collision of the ancient super-continent Gondwana with the North American shield, which caused the sea current to change. From then on, the movements of the earth's crust and the climatic changes continued to affect, alternately, the growth and destruction of reefs. A new sea, the Thetis, formed in the Mesozoic age (approximately 260 million years), extending east to west and joining together the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, and this change led to a new development of the reefs. The Mediterranean, a sea that today has no reefs at all, used to have the largest number of corals, being home to 65 genera versus the approximately 30 genera living in the entire Atlantic today.

Around the end of the Tertiary (25 million years ago), the Thetis split up under the pull of the continental drift and today's oceans rose, affecting the distribution of reefs all over the world. Madreporic formations moved towards the Indo-Malay region, after the Mediterranean Thetis had closed up, and India moved closer to Asia. In the Pliocene (11-14 million years ago), the reefs of the western Atlantic also grew apart from the Asian Pacific area because of the appearance of the lands that later on would have become Central America. The two main coral regions that still exist today were born during this era: the Caribbean and the Indo-Pacific.

Man and coral reef

The first economic resource relating to this ecosystem is tourism. Almost all Tropical countries and many countries in the Indian Ocean have wonderful reefs along their coasts. Tourists include lovers of underwater sports, simple amateurs equipped with masks and fins, fishermen and people who prefer the white, sunny beaches which are the fruit of the erosion of the reef corals. The countries that live mainly on "reef" tourism are approximately one hundred. It has been calculated that in Florida alone, the income from naturalistic tourism amounts to approximately 1.6 billion dollars a year. All the Caribbean countries depend on tourism for about one half of their gross domestic product.



Tourism has often been regarded as the most important economical resource in the Tropics. The climate and the reef of the Tropical countries are a nice change of sight for winter visitors coming from higher latitudes. An example are the Hawaii islands, where tourism makes up 35% of the gross domestic product and the number of visitors exceeds 7 million a year. Here, as in many other countries, the spreading of tourism has involved new problems as well: new buildings along scenic beaches, use of farmland for golf courses, increased water requirements in islands where water is a limited resource, increased waste disposal, including sewage waste, resulting in the proliferation of seaweed.

But there is also another type of tourism that involves a different way of travelling: sustainable tourism. The purpose of this type of tourism is to organise tours that respect the needs of the destination peoples and countries. Tourism should therefore be planned by consulting the locals, so that it is fair and equitable for the host community, economically sustainable in the long term, does not damage the tourist attractions and the natural environment. Even if it involves great planning efforts and substantial investments, it is absolutely necessary to protect tourism itself.

Traditional fishing

Reefs still give nourishment to millions of people living on tropical coasts and regions. Fishermen set out to sea on their boats fitted out with nets, traps and harpoons to take food for their families and to sell the surplus on the local markets. During the low tide, women and children sift through the reefs and puddles to find molluscs, fish and shellfish. If properly used, the reefs could virtually supply about 15 million tons of food every year (approximately 12% of the world's total catch). Unfortunately, though, reef animals have been indiscriminately cleaned out everywhere and fishermen are now having more and more problems earning their living. The first ones to disappear were large fishes, such as groupers. Crayfish used to be food for the poor in the Caribbean but now they have become so rare only tourists can afford to eat them in restaurants.

Corals and risky exotic souvenirs

In some countries, coral is taken from the cliffs to build houses, roads, or burnt into calcareous fertiliser; where this happens, the reefs have often been completely stripped off and are no longer protected from the heavy sea or potential hurricanes. All over the world, however, corals and shells are picked and sold as souvenirs or to make jewellery or other handicrafts. Because of this indiscriminate exploitation, many species of reef molluscs have now become rare. Local handicrafts can be bought in all tropical countries, including gold and silver jewels, coloured ornaments, decorated wood items, fabrics as well as reef animals or parts of reef animals. The collection of shells was already popular with the Assyrians, the Phoenicians, the Egyptians, the Greek and the Romans. In the past, the shells of some species of cowry were used as money in Africa and Asia. The giant clams, that can reach one and a half metre wide and up to 300 kilograms, were used until not long ago as ornamental tanks in gardens or as holy-water stoups in churches. A number of less valuable shells are reduced to powder and used as a calcareous material for the production of porcelain. In addition, many people do not know that taking home souvenirs made of dying species



such as corals and turtles is an offence. The Washington agreement on the trade of animal and vegetal species actually lists over 30,000 bans. Buying items made of dying animals (tigers, leopards, cheetahs, elephants, rhinoceroses, whales, butterflies, corals, turtles, etc.) is forbidden. So, going shopping in exotic countries without due care may be very expensive. For trying to take back home, for instance, a little Maldivian turtle, one could be fined up to 1,000 dollars or in some cases even imprisoned. In many Tropical countries, it is forbidden even to pick dead corals and shells from the beach (for instance in Kenya or the Maldives).

Inhabitants of the reef

Many peoples' lives depend on the reef as a source of food and income. The economy of the small coral islands is even more dependent on the reef. Usually these are poor people, who live in developing countries and can only count on natural resources for their survival.

The Maldivians. The Maldives have a population of approximately 200 thousand, over one fourth of them living in the capital city, Male. It is a mixed race with Indian, Arabic and African traits because of the many successive settlements of people of different origins. Each island has its own chieftain who is in charge of the laws and social organisation, and who reports to the head of the atoll, who in his turn reports to the Governor of Male. It is a rather closed society, based on family and task sharing; Maldivians have rare contacts with the inhabitants of other islands and there is no mixing with tourists, whose beaches are different from those of the locals. The Islamic religion is strongly felt about and the most important social unit is the family. The Maldivians' main occupation is fishing (for which they use the dhoni, the traditional Maldivian boat), even if tourism is a very important industry as well: the existing resorts are a source of employment for many inhabitants, even if they also use non-local people. Farming is instead of little importance, due to the lack of cultivable lands.

The Fijians. The Fiji Islands are the best-known archipelago in Melanesia, the "black islands". Seclusion has preserved these islands in their purity, in their luxuriant beauty and has allowed the locals to maintain their ancient traditions almost untouched. There are two main ethnic groups: the Fijians, of Melanesian origin, and the Indians, who arrived with the first bouts of colonisation and mainly used to grow sugarcanes. The meeting and clash of such different cultures caused coups d'état and endless internal struggles.

The Indians control trade and business, they are managers, doctors and lawyers and farm the land; the Fijians own instead 83% of the land and live by renting the land to the Indians who farm it. After the 1987 coup d'état, many Indian professionals left the country, making the economy go haywire and forcing the Government to try to redress the balance.

The economy of the Fiji Islands is based on farming, which employs approximately 37% of the population. The most important crop is sugarcane, which is picked and sent to sugar refineries to be processed and then almost entirely exported; important crops are also coconut palms, ginger and rice, maize, cassavas and sweet potatoes, the latter for domestic consumption only. Important are the industries related to the processing of farming products (sugar refineries, oil mills, creameries), to the processing of tobacco, timber and the production of concrete. Tourism has



remarkably boosted the local economy and is now the second most important source of income in the Fiji Islands.

Coral reefs disappearing

There are 109 countries in the world that can boast the presence of coral reefs. At least 93 of them have a severely damaged or even destroyed coral reef. Coral reefs, therefore, are in danger of disappearing forever in a short time due to a number of different causes, but the main culprits seem to be humans.

Fishing with cyanide. In the south-east of Asia, people live mainly on fishing, but the systems used are often very harmful to the reef, since cyanide and explosive are used to produce easier money. It has been calculated that between 1986 and 1991, 50% of the reefs of the Philippines was destroyed in this manner. Fishing with cyanide began in the Philippines in the early Sixties and supplies a market of one billion two hundred million dollars a year. In the beginning, this fishing method was used to take live fish for aquariums, then specialised in taking live fish, especially groupers, to be sold to restaurants. Selected and taken alive from the aquarium tank of the restaurant, some fish can cost up to 300 dollars a dish, sometimes becoming real status symbols, to be displayed at parties or important receptions. Even if fishing with cyanide is illegal in all Asian Pacific countries, it is still practised, above all in still untouched reef areas. The fishermen crumble up a cyanide tablet in a plastic bottle containing seawater, then plunge. When they find a prey, mostly hidden amidst the corals, they soak it with enough solution to stun it. The powerful poison is also dangerous for the fishermen who risk making contact with it during the operation. The stunned fish often ends up in hidden clefts and so the fishermen have to use hammers to break up pieces of coral. Dynamite is also used on reefs to break up coral blocks and rouse fish. This fishing method is not selective and also damages organisms that have no commercial value. Only in the Philippines are concrete measures beginning to be taken to discourage this fishing method: for instance, the Government is implementing courses to train fishermen on alternative fishing systems that are not harmful to the environment. In addition, inspections have been increased: a network of laboratories tries to find traces of cyanide on the fish sold. They are also trying to enforce the obligation to inspect the live fish that has to be sold and to hold environmental education courses in schools to raise the children's awareness on the damages caused by this fishing method.

Bleaching: whitening of coral

"Bleaching" is the term now commonly used to define the "whitening" of corals. In case of environmental stresses (for instance a temperature increase), coral polyps throw out the algae which live in symbiosis with them, the zooxanthellae, that give colour to the corals with their photosynthetic pigment. The consequence of such phenomenon is the coral colony losing its colour, sometimes becoming totally white. When like this, the coral is not dead; as soon as the conditions that caused this phenomenon cease, the algae re-colonise the polyps and the situation gets back as it was before. Otherwise, the coral will die. The main cause of the destruction of the reefs seems to

be the increasingly high temperature of the oceans. In 1998, the “bleaching” phenomenon reached catastrophic proportions due to the passage of the Niño (a phenomenon which involves abnormal displacements of water in the oceans) which caused the mean temperature to increase by 2°C, thus making 90% of the coral die in some areas in the Indian Ocean. It is as if all of a sudden a millenary forest caught fire, thus causing an almost irreparable ecological damage. In addition, the damage is not just ecological or biological, reducing biodiversity, but it is also a socio-economic one for all those communities whose survival depends on the reef.

Saving the reef

Everyone’s proper behaviour is the first step for the protection of any ecosystem, but this must necessarily be followed by political efforts world-wide. 60% of the world’s reefs have been classed as “at risk” by the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme). Among the main causes of the destruction of corals are the over-exploitation of fishing, tourist developments and a massive use of fertilisers. In 2001, the UN Environmental Agency launched a multibillionaire project for the protection of reefs all over the world. The initiative is called International Coral Reef Action Network, has obtained 10 million dollars’ funds from the United Nations and expects to raise another 20 for the management of the 10 most “critical” areas. This will include the mapping and monitoring of reefs, financial assistance to fishermen, improvements of tourist facilities, training and educational programs for local communities. The main areas selected for this first stage of the project are: the coasts of Kenya, Madagascar and Seychelles, Indonesia, Jamaica, Mexico and the Solomon Islands.

What you can do

There are really hundreds of thousands of tourists going on holiday in places with reefs ever year and a large part of them could further damage this fragile ecosystem, mostly without realising it. Here’s then a list of do’s and don’ts to avoid further damages to the reefs, according to environmentalist groups:

- never buy anything made of tortoiseshell, shark teeth, shells and coral in any country whatsoever;
- never eat any dish containing turtle meat, eggs or fat, such as the famous “turtle soup”. In particular, avoid doing this in Indonesia and Bali, where sales of this lovely dying species to tourists is unfortunately still very common;
- never eat shark-based dishes, such as the well-known “shark fin soup”. All tropical and subtropical species of sharks risk disappearing because of the indiscriminate fishing carried out to supply Chinese restaurants all over the world;
- do not overeat lobsters just because it is cheaper at the Tropics. European and American tourists have caused these shellfish to remarkably decrease in many Tropical seas;
- never buy any Chinese drugs made with reef organisms. Not only are these drugs unlikely to be effective, this trade is also threatening many species of fish, from sharks to seahorses;
- never walk on the reef, not even with rubber shoes or fins. Every step could damage the slow work that thousands of living beings have accomplished over hundreds of years;



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- never touch corals or other inhabitants of this ecosystem. Not only could you hurt yourselves, but you could also kill thousands of coral polyps. In addition, watch what you tread on with your fins and how you move at sea near the reef;
- never take away any live or dead organisms belonging to the reef. Corals, shells and starfish are much more beautiful alive and left in their habitat than among your ornaments back home.

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