



Why Learn About Coral Reef Ecosystems?

Coral reef ecosystems are now widely recognized as among the most biologically diverse and complex of ecosystems; they have been called the marine equivalent of tropical rain forests. Like rain forests, their significance and impact extend beyond the tropical environments in which they occur.

- Coral reefs are biologically significant. As "oases" of high productivity in typically sterile tropical seas, coral reefs are a source of much needed protein for adjacent human populations. And, the diverse life forms of coral reefs are potential sources of medical and commercial products.
- Coral reefs are geologically significant. The mineral skeletons of reef dwellers have contributed significantly to island and shoreline building. Where reefs exist, they function as breakwaters, protecting shorelines and property from damaging ocean waves. And, reef growth over time provides clues to earth's climate record and possibly plays a role in global carbon dioxide balance.
- Coral reefs are culturally significant. Many indigenous peoples living near coral reefs have legends and religious practices tied to reef life and the ocean environment. The reef yields dietary items, materials, medicines still in use in some cultures. And, traditional fishing and management practices are more conservation-oriented than introduced, modern technologies and attitudes.

Like rain forests, coral reefs are coming under increasing human impact: over harvesting and destructive fishing methods; shoreline dredging and development; sewage, fertilizer, industrial, and other forms of pollution; logging and agriculture that damage shoreline and inland watersheds; poorly managed boating, diving and other recreational activities. It is reported that 10% of the world's reefs have already been seriously degraded and a much greater percentage is threatened; there could be a significant loss of the world's reefs and their resources in the next century.

It is this alarming decline that warrants more widespread and exportable education about reefs. This, in fact, was one of the objectives of *International Year of the Reef, 1997*. This international effort brought together government agencies, universities, research centers, aquariums, environmental centers, and museums. Individually and collectively, institutions set up reef awareness campaigns, developed courses and curricula for students and teachers, produced and distributed print and audio/visual educational materials, raised funds for reef protection and management, and developed and advocated sound policies for reef conservation.

The Waikiki Aquarium offers classes, activities, lectures, and exhibits on corals and coral reefs. And, reef life profiles, coloring sheets, bibliographies, and coral-related classroom activities and crafts are available by request. Please contact: Education Department, Waikiki Aquarium, 2777 Kalākaua Avenue, HI 96815; phone: (808) 923-9741; FAX (808) 923-1771; visit the Aquarium's Web site at <<http://www.waquarium.mic.hawaii.edu>>.

Learn More About Reefs & Reef Life

Especially For Kids:

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Teacher References & Resources:

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