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Threatened Corals Targeted As Latest "Fashion Victim"

July 2005
Feature Story
by Jean-Michel Cousteau

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The "must have" fashion item of the season—coral jewelry—should be tagged "buyer beware" because it may have serious ramifications for some of the ocean's most embattled species.

From upper echelon retailers like Neiman Marcus to discounters and even online, fashion marketers have targeted coral as a stylish adornment that conveys status and exotic allure. In truth, despite their appearance as a mineral or a leafy plant, corals are animals that are being rapidly depleted worldwide. Feeding the fashion industry's increased demand will have a greater impact on coral colonies, especially those that are not capably managed.



"Collecting corals for the jewelry trade is dangerous to ocean reefs," says Dr. James Porter, Meigs Professor of Ecology at the University of Georgia and an advisor for the U.S. EPA Coral Reef Monitoring Project. "Many deep water coral reefs around the world are permanently altered due to over-harvesting."

Coral jewelry is this season's "hot" fashion trend. Over-harvesting correlates to a decrease in the health of coral reefs.
Photo credit: Carrie Vonderhaar, Ocean Futures Society

Black, pink, red and gold corals—those most sought after by the jewelry trade—are being over-collected, decimating some deep reef environments. More than 70 tons of red coral are taken from the Mediterranean Sea alone each year, and it has been virtually eliminated from the coasts. Many coral colonies in the Caribbean have also been wiped out.

Dr. Richard Grigg, professor of oceanography at the University of Hawaii and an expert in black coral, says corals in the seas off Taiwan and Japan are particularly threatened.

Deep corals are slow growing, many as little as one-quarter inch per year. Scientists have found it nearly impossible to determine the age of some of the largest remaining colonies. Already under siege from global warming, coastal run-offs and pollution that contribute to coral bleaching in more shallow water, precious corals face an even greater risk today due to non-selective and destructive technologies like bottom trawling and dredging that clear-cut reefs, leaving them wastelands. [continued](#)

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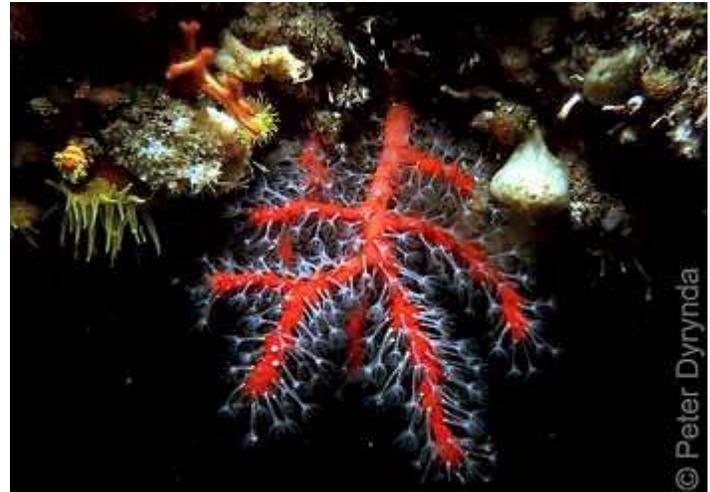
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How could this continue to happen in a world where the depletion of a species would be expected to gain international media attention and concern? The answer may lie in the very appearance of coral. While beautiful and intricate, corals do not have cute faces, pleading eyes or bleed from their wounds. They aren't elephants with majestic tusks, baby harp seals, or sleek big cats. Humans find it much more difficult to relate empathically to an animal that looks more like a rock or plant. With public interest limited mostly to research scientists and some non-governmental organizations, the run on coral has continued with mixed success at regulation.



Red coral, once abundant in shallow water, has been over-harvested and is now only found in deeper waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

Photo credit: Peter Dyrnynda, www.solaster.org

The use of coral by humans goes back through the ages as far as 20,000 B.C. Wall paintings and vases depict coral jewelry used by the Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians. The mysticism and myths about the power of coral has bridged cultures, religions and epochs. Black coral was once thought to have the power to cure disease. Like rhinoceros horn, it is falsely deemed an aphrodisiac in some parts of the world. Pink coral was coveted by the ancients for protecting newborn children. The Christian religion adopted the red coral color as a symbol of Christ's sacrifice. Various legends claim coral wards off witches and evil spirits, protects crops, and defends ships against lightning.

These magical tales of curative or seductive powers have made coral enormously valuable throughout history. As early as the 17th Century, merchants in Europe and India traded red coral for diamonds and amber. Coral was a coveted jewelry prize long before its fellow ocean resident—the pearl.

Precious and semi-precious corals have been a significant commodity for trade and have historical, cultural, artistic and economic implication for nations like Indonesia, the Philippines, and even the U.S. The problem, according to Dr. Gregor Hodgson of [Reef Check](#), is we don't know how much coral can be harvested in many of these vast areas before the negative impact becomes a serious and perhaps irreversible situation.

The problem is complicated by the different habitats and biological characteristics of the dozens of species involved. For example, the semi-precious blue coral is not really a coral at all, but it is found on coral reefs in shallow water. By contrast, the precious red coral is a kind of sea fan that lives at depths of one thousand feet or more – well below the limits of scuba diving tourists. The most valuable precious corals have the slowest growth rates – less than ½ inch per year. In a perfect world, we would study the size of the populations and regulate collection to a sustainable level. However, fisheries management has proven difficult in the U.S., let alone in countries with a low capacity and few resources.



Hundreds of schooling baitfish cluster around a large outcropping of black coral. Photo credit: Jeffery N. Jeffords

With value comes greed. Greed causes exploitation of natural resources. What solutions can we offer curb our international appetite of coral consumption?

First, we need to make the public aware that the coral jewelry they buy comes at an environmental cost. It shouldn't be fashionable to pillage coral populations where precious coral harvesting isn't properly managed. In Hawaii, for example, harvesting of black and other corals are restricted by federal and state authorities to three percent per year. Other coral populations are not as well protected. Conservation must be a priority and we should communicate the threat of coral's survival worldwide. We need to emphasize that it is more "chic" to care about marine conservation.

Until more is known about coral populations and management options, consumers should carefully consider purchases of coral products including coral jewelry, coral sculptures, and coral calcium diet supplements. Knowledge is the first step toward an informed choice and a market-driven statement in favor of the ocean. More scientific studies must also be done to truly understand the biological and

economic trade-offs we face in the coral trade. As my father said, "You cannot protect what you do not understand."

Some important progress is being made. Dredging for coral is now banned in the Mediterranean. The Western Pacific Fishery Management Council recently required fishermen and divers to limit their harvest of black coral to specimens that are about 20 years old, because of signs the younger populations of these corals were seriously declining. Unfortunately, a five-year ban had been proposed, but was rejected by the council. The Hawaiian sales of black coral, the state's "gemstone," is estimated at nearly \$30 million a year, a strong incentive to ignore sound scientific advice.

Corals are striking living features of our ocean. In their habitat, they are dazzling and colorful animals that are an integral part of the ecosystem. They create a thriving "city under the sea." They are worth more alive than dead. Marketers have created a demand for corals to satisfy our human vanity. Their intrinsic value is not as objects of adornment but rather as life forms worthy of our protection. We should choose to care, and decide not to wear.

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