



[coasts and oceans](#) > [newsfile](#) > [critical battle for reefs in the philippines](#)

Critical battle for reefs in the Philippines



Posted: 14 Nov 2005

by *Henrylito Tacio*

Findings from a recent survey of coral reefs in the Philippines, reveal that their destruction continues, despite some conservation gains in parts of the coast. But these positive examples do give real grounds for hope, say local experts.

In the late 1970s, a study conducted by the East-West Center in Hawaii showed that more than half of the coral reefs in the Philippines were "in advanced states of destruction." Only about 25 per cent of live coral cover were in "good condition," while only 5 per cent were in "excellent condition."

The more recent survey conducted by the Marine Science Institute of the University of the Philippines at Diliman shows that out of 742 stations monitored nationwide, 39 or only 5.3 per cent were still in excellent condition (75-100 per cent live coral cover), 187 or 25.2 per cent could be considered in good condition (50-74 per cent live coral cover), 290 or 39.0 per cent were in fair condition (25-49.9 per cent live coral cover), while the rest, 226 stations or 30.5 per cent were in poor condition (0-24 per cent live coral cover).

"Nowhere else in the world are coral reefs abused as much as the reefs in the Philippines," commented marine scientist Don McAllister, who has studied the cost of coral reef destruction in the country.

Global survey

Now comes another disturbing report from Reef Check, an international organization assessing the health of reefs in 82 countries. "Despite its high biodiversity, the Philippines' reefs are very badly damaged. It's one of the worst damaged in the world, on the average," says George Hodgson, founder of the California-based organisation.

This is bad news for fishermen. A single reef can support as many as 3,000 species of marine life. As fishing grounds, they are thought to be 10 to 100 times as productive per unit area as the open sea.

In the Philippines, an estimated 10-15 per cent of the total fisheries come from coral reefs. About 80-90 per cent of the income of small island communities come from fisheries. "Coral reef fish yields range from 20 to 25 metric tons per square kilometer per year for healthy reefs," says Dr. Angel C. Alcala, former environment secretary.

Coral reefs, or "biological wonders" as environmental author Don Hinrichsen calls them, are among the largest and oldest living communities of plants and animals on earth, having evolved between 200 and 450 million years ago.

Coral species

"Today, most established coral reefs are between 5,000 and 10,000 years old; many of them forming thin veneers over older, much thicker reef



[picture gallery](#)

[printable version](#)

[email a friend](#)

LATEST NEWSFILE



[Critical battle for reefs in the Philippines](#)

[Fiji chiefs create marine sanctuaries on world's third largest reef](#)

[Save our oceans call by world conservationists](#)

[Death traps destroying Atlantic sharks](#)

[Shell pipeline puts gray whales in peril](#)

[Tsunami disaster highlights need for environmental protection](#)

[How the mangrove shield was lost](#)

[World rushes relief to South Asian tsunami survivors](#)

[Huge no-fishing zones 'offer only hope' of saving marine ecosystem from disaster](#)

[Great Barrier Reef becomes world's largest marine protected area](#)

More articles in our Archive

[2004](#)

[2003](#)

[2002](#)

[2001](#)

[Population Pressures](#) <

[Food and Agriculture](#) <

[Reproductive Health](#) <

[Health and Pollution](#) <

[Coasts and Oceans](#) <

[Renewable Energy](#) <

[Poverty and Trade](#) <

[Climate Change](#) <

[Green Industry](#) <

[Eco Tourism](#) <

[Biodiversity](#) <

[Mountains](#) <

[Forests](#) <

[Water](#) <

[Cities](#) <

[Global Action](#) <

[Ads by Goooooogle](#)

[Buy Live Corals](#)

Tons of Hobby
Info. 15 Day
Guarantee Free
Shipping or \$29.99
Flat
www.vividaquariums.com

[Coral Reef Screensavers](#)

Over 10,000
underwater
features 80 talking
fish. Free
Downloads
www.clubaquatica.com

[Discount Items](#)

Unique and
affordable
memorabilia.
Search for deals
now!
www.ebay.com

[Healthy LPS Coral](#)

Add Beautiful Coral
To Any Aquarium 7
Day Guaranteed
To Stay Alive!
www.JustCoral.com



structures," said Hinrichsen, who has explored coral reefs around the world for his recent book on coastal ecosystem. (See *review in our book section*).

Most of the reefs are found in the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn - in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and South Pacific. They also thrive where warm current are found off Florida, Bermuda, southern Japan and Australia. The richest reefs, however, are located in the region bounded by Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

The Philippines holds one of the most extensive coral reefs in the world with a sprawling area of 27,000 square kilometres. These contain a quarter of all the coral species known in the world. Unfortunately, only 400 of these species remain, according to the Center for Environmental Concern.

"The coral reefs of the Philippines have the highest number of marine fish species in the world," said Dr. Rafael Guerrero III, executive director of the Laguna-based Philippine Council for Aquatic and Marine Research and Development (PCAMRD).

Underwater vistas

Unfortunately, these reefs may not survive unless they receive much greater care. "A dive into the depths of Samal reef gardens will reveal colourful underwater vistas, but not all are in a good shape," says Gregory Ira, a Filipino-American environmentalist.

Dr. Robert Ginsburg, a specialist on coral reefs working with the Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science at the University of Miami, said human beings have a lot to do with the rapid destruction of reefs. "In areas where people are using the reefs or where there is a large population, there are significant declines in coral reefs," he pointed out.

Dr. Edgardo Gomez, a Filipino marine scientist, has the same opinion. "If asked what the major problem of coral reefs is, my reply would be 'The pressure of human population,'" he said. A visit to any fishing village near a reef will quickly confirm this, he added. "There are just too many fishermen," he pointed out.

Still blasting

Destructive fishing methods - ranging from dynamite blasts to cyanide poisons - are destroying vast areas of reef. Fishermen are still blasting reefs with dynamite to stun the fish, doing immense damage, and greatly reducing their productivity.

According to the Coral Reef Alliance (CORAL), an estimated 330,000 pounds of cyanide is sprayed on Philippine coral reefs each year, destroying what Jacques-Yves Cousteau described as "the natural productive environment which allows the renewal of marine resources."

Coral mining has also depleted the country's reefs. An estimated 1.5 million kilograms of coral are harvested annually as part of the international trade in reef products. The Philippines is estimated to supply more than a third of the total.

In recent years, a phenomenon called bleaching has also threatened large areas of the country's reefs. This adds to the problems caused by sedimentation (following deforestation), quarrying of the reefs for construction purposes and pollution from industry, mining, and urban sprawl.

Hopeful signs

"About 95 per cent of the reefs in the Philippines have been badly damaged," Hodgson said. The good news is: "With just a little bit of effort, you can allow them to recover," he added.

One sign of hope is the Tubbataha Reef. In the late 1980s, overfishing and destructive fishing practices were rampant, with coral cover reduced by 50 per cent over a five-year period ending in 1989. Today, the 33,200-hectare area is a national marine park.

Both government and non-governmental organisations have worked together to manage the park since its establishment in 1988. Since 1989, the condition of the coral reef substrate has "improved remarkably" and the diversity of fish is "exceptionally high."

Another case is the Apo and Balicasag Island Reefs in Central Visayas. In the late 1970s, blast and cyanide fishing, as well as other destructive fishing practices, threatened these reefs. Thanks to a community-based marine management programme, put in place in the mid-1980s, these practices ceased by 1997.

In 1992, surveys indicated that live coral cover and fish populations within the sanctuaries had "increased substantially" along with fish yields per unit area off Apo Island.

There's more to coral reefs than fish. "The extensive destruction of Philippine coral reefs has constricted the development of tourism in the country's coastal areas," contends Allister. "If the coral reefs recover, there will enormous growth in coastal tourism."

According to Dr. Alcala, the aesthetic quality of protected coral reefs serve to attract tourists. He cites the case of Apo Island. This 100-hectare marine protected area brings in some US\$126,000 annually to the 600 inhabitants of the island and to a number of boat operations on the mainland Negros.

For centuries, coastal communities have used reef plants and animals for their medicinal properties. In the Philippines, for instance, giant clams are eaten as a malaria treatment.

Dr. Guerrero urges: "We are the stewards of our nation's resources; we should take care of our national heritage so that future generations can enjoy them. Let's do our best to save our coral reefs. Our children's children will thank us for the effort."

Henrylito Tacio is Planet 21 Contributing Editor in East Asia.

Related links

Factfile: [Coral reefs](#)

[Coral nears the crisis point](#)

[Southeast Asia reefs are under greater threat](#)

[Philippine coasts in deep trouble](#)



© People & the Planet 2000 - 2005



[contact us](#) | [site map](#) | ©

[overview](#) | [newsfile](#) | [books](#) | [films](#) | [links](#) | [factfile](#) | [features](#) | [glossary](#)

[peopleandplanet.net](#)
designed & powered by [tincan it](#)