

50 Reefs: A Global Plan to Save Corals from Extinction

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SYDNEY, Australia, March 12, 2017 (ENS) – Ninety percent of the world's coral reefs are expected to disappear by 2050 due to climate change, pollution and poor fishing practices. Now, a unique philanthropic coalition has launched 50 Reefs, a plan to save the most critical reefs so once the climate stabilizes they can recseed the entire coral ecosystem.

The initiative, launched at The Economist World Ocean Summit in February, brings together ocean, climate and marine scientists as well as conservationists from around the world to develop a list of the 50 most critical coral reefs in need of protection.

The idea is to identify 50 high priority coral reefs that have the best chance of surviving climate change and can then help in the recovery of coral reef ecosystems once global temperatures have stabilized.

As the project unfolds through 2017, a panel of world leading scientists will oversee a process that prioritizes reefs worldwide deploying a transparent 'decision algorithm' developed at The Centre for Excellence in Environmental Decisions at The University of Queensland.



Coral bleaching on Australia's Great Barrier Reef,
Feb. 10, 2016 (Photo by [Oregon State University](#))

The datasets used, such as reef biodiversity, climate vulnerability, current health and reef connectivity, will be agreed upon by the independent panel of scientific experts drawn from some of the world's leading organizations.

To be announced in late 2017, the list is expected to represent a diverse portfolio of reefs to maximize returns for biodiversity, ecosystems and people.

Funding of this global effort is led by Bloomberg Philanthropies with The Tiffany & Co. Foundation and The Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, who all aim to prevent the worst economic, social, and environmental impacts of the coral crisis.

Bloomberg News founder and former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg is now the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Cities and Climate Change. "When people think of climate change, they often think of extreme heat, severe storms, and raging wildfires," he said. "But some of the most disastrous effects of climate change are out of sight – on the ocean floor."

"In fact, without coral reefs, we could lose up to a quarter of the world's marine biodiversity and hundreds of millions of the world's poorest people would lose their primary source of food and livelihoods. We must not allow this to happen," said Bloomberg.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and Australian Institute of Marine Science said in a statement Friday that mass bleaching is occurring on the Great Barrier Reef for the second consecutive year.

Dr. Neal Cantin from the Australian Institute of Marine Science said the recurrence of widespread coral bleaching in back-to-back summers indicates there was not enough time between last year's extreme heat event for the corals to fully recover.

"We are seeing a decrease in the stress tolerance of these corals," Dr. Cantin said. "This is the first time the Great Barrier Reef has not had a few years between bleaching events to recover."

Scientists predict that within 30 years the planet could face a complete collapse of the coral reef ecosystem, including the loss of thousands of species of fish and other important organisms.



Corals on the Mesoamerican Reef have experienced widespread bleaching events in 1995, 1998, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2009 and 2010. Corozal, Belize, Dec. 2016 (Photo by Viv Lynch)

"What we already know about the future of coral reefs is alarming. Without immediate action, we could lose this crucial ecosystem entirely within a few short decades," said Paul G. Allen, philanthropist and Microsoft co-founder.

"What we don't yet know – the data gap leading scientists are seeking to fill through this initiative – are exactly where to focus critical conservation efforts to ensure the long-term survival of coral reef habitats," said Allen.

The extinction of coral reefs poses a critical threat for the hundreds of millions of people in some of the world's developing countries who depend on reefs for their livelihoods, culture, food security, and nutrition.

One in every four fish in the ocean lives part of its life on a coral reef. In the coming decades this could mean that half a billion people will lose access to a major source of protein, with developing countries being the most vulnerable.

"This is an all hands on deck moment," said Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, director of the Global Change Institute at The University of Queensland. "We are establishing the first global coalition of philanthropic, governmental and non-governmental organizations that will be aimed at slowing the decline of the world's coral reefs — thereby preserving the livelihoods and culture of reef-dependent communities all over the world."



Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg dives on Great Barrier Reef (Photo courtesy Great Barrier Reef Foundation)

Professor Hoegh-Guldberg says that the global decline of corals reefs over the past 12 months indicates that even under severe cuts to the use of fossil fuels, we are likely to lose another 90 percent of corals before conditions stabilize under the Paris Climate Agreement.

"These remaining coral reefs are extremely important to the future of tropical ecosystems as they are likely to provide the seed stock required to repopulate stable tropical oceans," he said.

After last year's mass coral bleaching event on the Great Barrier Reef, Hoegh-Guldberg and his team feel the time has run out to argue about the politics of climate change and fossil fuels.

"To continue in the current leadership vacuum is to ignore an overwhelming body of evidence that demonstrates that everything we depend on and hold dear will be stripped away, potentially exposing our nation to catastrophic conditions," he says.

The 50 Reefs initiative employs a three-pronged strategy to address the coral crisis:

- * – Collaboration to agree on the criteria among world's top scientists using global data sets
- * – Identification of key science needs and regional solutions by scientists and conservation experts
- * – Worldwide coral conservation & climate change communications campaign

Conservation experts from around the world will identify the types of interventions necessary to ensure reef survival until the climate stabilizes. The goal is to catalyze global action and investments in the 50 key reef geographies prioritized in the survey.

"This initiative was developed after witnessing unimaginable loss of reefs over the last two years," said Richard Vevers, founder of The Ocean Agency, based in Sydney, a prime mover of the 50 Reefs initiative.

"Even if the targets set by the Paris climate agreement are met, we will lose about 90 percent of our reefs by mid-century," said Vevers. "50 Reefs gives us hope that we can save enough of these surviving reefs to ensure they can bounce back over time."

To raise awareness of the coral reef crisis and the threat of ocean warming, the 50 Reefs initiative will coordinate communications on the individual reef systems; encourage influential support for effective marine protection; and shine a global spotlight on government and stakeholder action and inaction to stop climate change and to protect the 50 most important reefs.

"It is imperative that we protect coral reefs, cornerstones of healthy oceans, from the myriad of threats they are facing today, including the damaging effects of climate change," said Anisa Kamadolli Costa, chairman and president of The Tiffany & Co. Foundation. "We believe that the 50 Reefs initiative's innovative approach will be critical to protecting beautiful, thriving coral reefs for future generations."

The 50 Reefs initiative builds on the shared experience of The Ocean Agency and the Global Change Institute who carried out the most comprehensive global survey of coral reefs and coral bleaching ever recorded, in partnership with Google and the global insurance company XL Catlin.

This work is the subject of Jeff Orlowski's Audience Award-winning documentary, "Chasing Coral," honored in January at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. The documentary will be released worldwide on Netflix later this year.

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