



MEDIA RELEASE

Coral reefs down, but not out

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THE findings for coral reefs in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Assessment Report may be bleak, but Australian researchers argue adaptive management options for reefs at risk are still in sight.

Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, who chairs the global Coral Reef Targeted Research and Capacity Building for Management (CRTR) Program's Coral Bleaching Working Group, says there is significant research currently underway to support management responses for the coming century of climate change.

"The CRTR Program has a global outlook but local focus on confronting the issue of climate change, in addition to other coral reef stressors, such as pollution or over-exploitation, affecting the future of coral reefs," he says.

"The problems described in the Australia and New Zealand chapters of the latest IPCC report are not confined to this region or the Great Barrier Reef. In fact, huge problems face coastal communities in many developing countries – reef degradation, sea level rise, loss of ecosystem function.

"The IPCC report for the first time outlines challenges that will cost Australia its enviable lifestyle and economic prosperity if we don't take action immediately. This type of change needs careful thought; to delay strong and decisive action any further, however, is foolhardy."

The CRTR Program is a partnership between the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the World Bank, The University of Queensland (Australia), the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and approximately 40 research institutes & other third parties around the world. The GEF is an international financial mechanism which provides funding to developing countries to address global environmental issues and sustainable development initiatives.

Adaptive management actions known to reduce the cumulative stress on reefs include enforcing coastal environmental laws and zoning; establishing effective networks of marine protected areas for ecologically important habitats and processes vital to coral reefs; restricting fishing on reefs; outlawing destructive fishing methods; and controlling pollution from land, which has been linked to coral disease outbreak via degraded water quality.

Professor Hoegh-Guldberg pointed to major CRTR Program research outputs due to be published later this year. These are expected to provide new insight into the actions that governments and coastal managers can take to counter the risk of further coral reef degradation from global issues such as changing climate, rising sea temperatures and ocean acidification.

The CRTR Program is also working with developing countries to monitor the health of coral reefs and other indicators, assessing the effectiveness of management interventions and policies.

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“Our network of researchers is working to arm communities and governments with scientific research and management expertise related to coral bleaching, disease, connectivity, restoration and the use of modelling and remote sensing for improved management of the many issues facing coral reefs into the future,” he says.

Professor Hoegh-Guldberg leads the CRTR Program’s world-wide research effort on coral bleaching. Bleaching is associated with elevated sea water temperature and occurs when the symbiosis between corals and symbiotic dinoflagellate algae breaks down. These tiny symbiotic plants trap light, producing huge amounts of energy to build the limestone framework of the reef in which thousands of reef creatures live.

“If bleaching goes on for too long, corals will die,” Professor Hoegh-Guldberg says. “In the case of 1998, a major bleaching event extinguished 16 per cent of the world’s corals in a single year. To lose corals, as the IPCC report suggests may happen as early as 2050, would be a disaster for the Great Barrier Reef and the many people and industries that depend upon it.

More than 100 million people worldwide depend on coral reefs for their daily food resources. Industries around the world in both developing and developed countries depend on coral reefs for income.

“To lose this source of income and support will create large scale social disruption as people move from coastal areas to large cities in search of a way to support themselves,” says Professor Hoegh-Guldberg.

“Australia sits literally in the middle of a region dominated by developing countries that depend heavily on coral reefs. We have a special obligation and responsibility with respect to greenhouse gases, climate change and working on the key issues outlined in the IPCC report with other countries throughout Australasia and the South Pacific.

“There is plenty we need to do, but we must start wholeheartedly now if interventions are going to have any chance of working. There is no doubt in my mind that the thousands of scientists involved in the IPCC report have got it right. The threat is real and present; the issue now is to get on with solving the problem, and that is what international collaborations such as the CRTR Program intend to do.”

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Editors please note: high resolution images and graphics relating to coral bleaching and climate change can be downloaded from the following website:

http://marine.uq.edu.au/Ohg/Images_Apr-07/Images.htm

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