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National Coral Taskforce puts plan into effect as bleaching intensifies

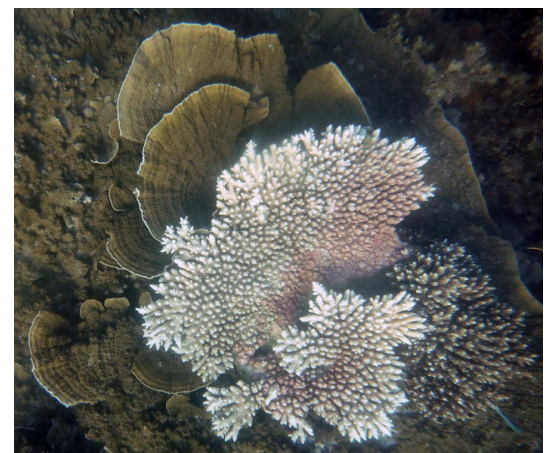
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Coral bleaching due to global warming has continued to worsen in the northern Great Barrier Reef (GBR) over the past two weeks, even as cooler weather has brought significant reprieve to central and southern areas.

“After months of El Nino conditions, we had hoped that cloudy weather in the past few weeks would quench the overheating of the Great Barrier Reef along its entire length,” says Prof. Terry Hughes, Taskforce convener and Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies.

“Unfortunately, the northern sectors have not cooled down enough, and we’re now recording quite extensive levels of coral bleaching. These northern reefs are in the most remote, pristine area of the Great Barrier Reef and it’s a real tragedy to see them being affected like this. Thankfully the rest of the reef is now safe as the summer heat dissipates.”

The northern Great Barrier Reef stretches for 1000km from the tip of Cape York to Cairns.



Bleached Acropora plate coral, next to unbleached Montipora coral. Picture taken at Cleveland Bay. Credit: Andrew Baird

“This week we’ll start flying extensive aerial surveys on charter planes to measure the extent of the bleaching. Similar aerial surveys were done during the two earlier mass bleaching events in 1998 and 2002, and a third set will provide invaluable information about which reefs are particularly at risk of bleaching.”

Dr Neal Cantin, Research Scientist at the Australian Institute of Marine Science, has been closely following weather and climate patterns over the Great Barrier Reef, and explains that “Water temperatures on the Northern Great Barrier Reef for the next few weeks are likely to remain far above average and the corals continue to face a bleaching risk.”

Today, based on the severity of bleaching reports from the northern GBR, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has lifted its bleaching warning from Response Level 1 (mild and widespread) to Response Level 2 (severe and local).



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Note to editors:

Coral bleaching occurs when abnormal environmental conditions, like heightened sea temperatures, cause corals to expel tiny photosynthetic algae, called 'zooxanthellae'. The loss of these colourful algae causes the corals to turn white, and 'bleach'. Bleached corals can recover if the temperature drops and zooxanthellae are able to recolonise them, otherwise the coral may die.

The National Coral Bleaching Taskforce is designed to co-ordinate research effort among Australia's marine science community in the event of a mass bleaching event in Australia. The taskforce draws together 10 research institutions across Australia to co-ordinate the efforts of over 300 scientists.

The associated research institutions are, ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, Australian Institute of Marine Science, CSIRO, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, James Cook University, NOAA, University of Queensland, University of Sydney, University of Western Australia, WA Department of Parks and Wildlife.

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Shark babies remain strong despite ocean acidification

An Australian study published today has found that certain baby sharks are able to cope with the effects of ocean acidification.

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Signatures of transgenerational molecular brain response to acidification in fish

Abstract: The oceans are becoming more acidic due to the absorption of atmospheric CO₂. This process, known as ocean acidification, is expected to have significant impacts on marine life. A new study has found that certain baby sharks are able to cope with the effects of ocean acidification. The study, published in the journal *PLoS ONE*, found that the brains of these sharks contain a specific protein that helps them to maintain their pH levels. This protein is thought to be a result of transgenerational inheritance, meaning that the parents' experiences with acidification can affect their offspring's ability to cope with it.



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