

CORAL REEF FACTS

A coral reef is a busy underwater city. There are millions of caves, crevices, tunnels and balconies that are home and hiding places for fish, eels, crabs, shrimp and thousands of other creatures. Because there are so many brightly colored animals that depend on each other living in these water gardens, some scientists have compared reefs to tropical rainforests and called them "underwater jungles."

1 - Often mistaken for a plant, coral is actually made up of dime-sized animals called coral polyps which form a colony.

2 - Coral polyps are related to anemones and jellyfish, and like their stinging cousins, capture prey with tentacles that surround their puckery mouths and also house a symbiotic algae in their tissues that contribute food to the host through photosynthesis.

3 - To survive, the soft-bodied coral polyps secrete a protective cup of calcium carbonate, or limestone, around its body.

4 - When a couple of zillion coral polyps get together with their ancestors and close relatives, they form the largest and possibly the oldest living organisms on earth: Coral reefs!

5 - Not all coral species build reefs, but those that do can build structures that dwarf Manhattan skyscrapers.

6 - Scientists divide coral reefs into four general groups: Atolls, barrier reefs, fringing reefs and patch reefs.

7 - Coral reefs are the most biologically diverse ecosystems known to exist anywhere on the planet. One-third of all the world's fish species, and possibly as many as half a million different animal species altogether can be found in and around coral reefs.

8 - Long ago coral covered most of the planet, but geological events limited its range. Coral polyps first appeared on Earth more than 500 million years ago. Their history is recorded in fossils buried all over the globe.

9 - Today, coral reefs are found only within a narrow band of ocean that circles the globe between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn.

10 - Reef-building coral needs warm water -- about 70 degrees Fahrenheit. The water must also be free of sediment and sand.

11 - Competition on a coral reef is intense! To survive, coral reef species rely on wondrous defense mechanisms, feeding behaviors, and mating rituals.

12 - According to the Center of Marine Conservation in Washington, D.C., virtually every coral reef ecosystem in the world is endangered due to the effects of over fishing, vessel groundings, pollution, and over-harvesting of coral for aquariums.