



CAN-003-Coral Reefs-South China Sea

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Eco News

'China's economic boom savages 80% coral reefs'

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South China Sea, Coral reefs, Economic boom

Melbourne: China's coral reefs have suffered a devastating 80 percent decline in recent decades, driven mainly by the communist giant's unrestrained economic growth, according to a new international study published today.

The first comprehensive survey of the state of corals along mainland China and in the South China Sea reports a grim picture of decline, degradation and destruction resulting from coastal development, pollution and overfishing.

The study led by Professor Terry Hughes from Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies and Dr Hui Huang of the South China Sea Institute of Oceanology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, describes the situation as a "wicked problem" meaning it has no easy solutions

"A wicked problem is one that is very hard to solve without having a whole lot of other foreseen and unforeseen consequences to people, industries and to the environment itself," Hughes said in a statement.

"China's ongoing economic expansion has exacerbated many wicked environmental problems, including widespread habitat loss due to coastal development, unsustainable levels of fishing, and pollution," the report said.

"We found that coral abundance has declined by at least 80 percent over the past 30 years on coastal fringing reefs along the Chinese mainland and adjoining Hainan Island. On offshore atolls and archipelagos claimed by 6 countries in the South China Sea, coral cover has declined from an average of 60 percent to around 20 percent within the past 10-15 years," it said.

"So far, climate change has affected these reefs far less than coastal development, pollution, overfishing, and destructive fishing practices. Ironically, these widespread declines in the condition of reefs are unfolding as China's research and reef-management capacity are rapidly expanding," researchers said.

The corals of the South China Sea region cover an area of 30,000 square kilometers, have high conservation values, and support the livelihoods of tens of thousands of fishers. The fact that some reefs are claimed by several different countries makes conservation and management particularly difficult. "Typically, when a coral reef degrades it is taken over by seaweeds and from there, experience has shown, it is very hard to return it to its natural coral cover. The

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window of opportunity to recover the reefs of the South China Sea is closing rapidly, given the state of degradation revealed in this study," Hughes said.

Scientists conclude that the loss of coral cover in the South China Sea, as elsewhere, is due mainly to a failure of governance on the part of the nation's responsible for the marine environment.

The study was published in the prestigious journal Conservation Biology.

PTI

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