



Australian Coral Reef Society Inc

Promoting the scientific study of Australian coral reefs

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Australian Coral Reef Society response to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the Australian Institute of Marine Science Reef snapshot: Summer 2021-22

(<https://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/the-reef/reef-health/reef-snapshot>)

Rising water temperatures driving coral bleaching are the primary threat to the health of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR). The fact that the February 2022 marine heatwave was both the first ever experienced during La Niña conditions and the fourth mass bleaching event since 2016 reflects the growth in frequency and intensity of this threat to the GBR. La Niña conditions generally bring cooler summers than in other years, yet December 2021 was the hottest December since 1990.

While the scale of coral mortality is not yet known, recurrent bleaching events profoundly change the composition of coral communities on the reef. Reports of low coral mortality may reflect shifts in the composition of coral communities, with assemblages being more dominated by resilient and stress tolerant corals, but an overall loss of biodiversity in the ecosystem. To this end, urgent work is still needed to devise a credible national plan to achieve domestic greenhouse gas emissions reductions at a speed consistent with the survival of the GBR.

The snapshot is an initiative from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) and CSIRO, first released in the summer of 2019-2020 to provide a concise, easy to understand summary of how the Reef has persisted over the past summer, what this means for coral and the actions being taken to safeguard coral health. In combination with other sources, the snapshot is informed by Reef-wide aerial surveys. For the first time, the surveys were led by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the Australian Institute of Marine Science in the second half of March 2022 to assess the extent of coral bleaching over 719 reefs along the GBR, whereas the post-bleaching aerial surveys in 2016-2020 were coordinated by the National Coral Bleaching Taskforce led by Professor Terry Hughes. It is good to see that this work has been carried on in the wake of Professor Hughes' retirement, although the delayed release of this report indicates the bureaucracy and constraints of large institutions delivering important information to the Australian public in a timely manner.

The devastating consequences of increasing temperatures around the globe cannot be overstated. Australian coral reefs are constantly in the public eye as they are susceptible to coral bleaching, with an astounding four mass bleaching events since 2016. Slowing climate change is now, more than ever, critical to the health of coral reefs.

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<https://australiancoralreefsociety.org/>

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