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'Freezer plan' bid to save coral

By Matt McGrath

BBC News, Copenhagen



The prospects of saving the world's coral reefs now appear so bleak that plans are being made to freeze samples to preserve them for the future.

A meeting in Denmark took evidence from researchers that most coral reefs will not survive even if tough regulations on greenhouse gases are put in place.

Scientists proposed storing samples of coral species in liquid nitrogen.

That will allow them to be reintroduced to the seas in the future if global temperatures can be stabilised.

Legislators from 16 major economies have been meeting in the Danish capital, Copenhagen, to try to agree the way forward on climate change.

The meeting has been organised by the Global Legislators Organisation for a Balanced Environment (Globe).

Losing the fight

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Simon Harding
Zoological Society of London

One of the issues they have been considering is what to do with coral

reefs, which make up less than a quarter of 1% of the ocean's floor.

Yet the reefs are a key source of food, income and coastal protection for around 500 million people worldwide.

At this meeting, politicians and scientists acknowledged that global emissions of carbon dioxide are rising so fast that we are losing the fight to save coral and the world must develop an alternative plan.

Freezing samples for the future may be a necessary option.

"Well it's the last ditch effort to save biodiversity from the reefs which are extremely diverse systems," said Simon Harding from the Zoological Society of London (ZSL).

"It would take other work to try and reconstruct the reef so that you can start the process of building up a reef again," he said.

"That is something that needs to be looked at in detail, but we can definitely store the species and save them in that way."

According to recent research, one of the world's most important concentrations of coral - the so-called Coral Triangle in South East Asia - could be destroyed by climate change before the end of this century with significant impacts on food security and livelihoods.

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Key coral reefs 'could disappear'

By Lucy Williamson

BBC News, Manado, Indonesia

The world's most important coral region is in danger of being wiped out by the end of this century unless fast action is taken, says a new report.

The international conservation group WWF warns that 40% of reefs in the Coral Triangle have already been lost.

The area is shared between Indonesia and five other South East Asian nations and is thought to contain 75% of the world's coral species.

It is likened to the Amazon rainforest in terms of its biodiversity.

Temperature change

The WWF report paints a bleak picture. If the world's richest coral reef is destroyed, the fish that people rely on for food could be gone.

By the end of the century, 100 million people across South East Asia could be on the march, looking for something to eat. Communities might be breaking down and economies destroyed.

"The productivity of ocean... is plummeting right now"

Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg

WWF report author

It's billed as a worst-case scenario, but the report's chief author, Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg, says it is not as bad as the future we're currently headed towards.

"Up until now we haven't realized how quickly this system is changing," says Professor Hoegh-Guldberg.

"In the last 40 years in the Coral Triangle, we've lost 40% of coral reefs and mangroves - and that's probably an underestimate. We've fundamentally changed the way the planet works in terms of currents and this is only with a 0.7 degree change in terms of temperature.

"What's going to happen when we exceed two or four or six?"

Climate change consequences

Avoiding a worst-case scenario would need significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and better controls on fishing and coastal areas, says the report.

If it goes, an entire eco-system goes with it - and that, says Prof Hoegh-Gudberg, has serious consequences for its ability to tackle climate change.

"Pollution, the inappropriate use of coastal areas, these are destroying the productivity of ocean which is plummeting right now. That is the system that traps CO₂ - 40% of CO₂ goes into the ocean.

"Now if we interrupt that, the problems on planet earth become even greater," says Prof Hoegh-Gudberg.

Indonesia is hosting the World Ocean Conference this week because, it says, oceans have been neglected so far in global discussions on climate change.

It wants the issue to have a bigger profile at UN climate talks later this year.