

**Coral reef food web worksheet answers**

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As you duck beneath the water's surface, your senses click into overdrive. To your right, a bright orange clown fish ducks behind a sea anemone while a moray eel retreats into its coral cave. As you float in the other direction, you spot giant sea fans dotting the underwater landscape and branching corals beckoning towards you, as though inviting you to join them. You are scuba diving along one of the many coral reefs scattered throughout the equatorial seas, glimpsing the multitude of life that this largest of living structures supports. Your underwater view, however, may be limited. Seventy percent of coral reefs may be gone in less than 40 years if the present rate of destruction continues [source: Nature Conservancy]. Coral reefs are made predominantly of stony corals and supported by the limestone skeleton they excrete. These rainforests of the sea are home to a quarter of all marine fish species [source: Nature Conservancy]. In addition to the variety of marine life they support, coral reefs are also immensely beneficial to humans, buffeting coastal regions from strong waves and storms, providing millions of people with food and jobs and prompting advances in modern medicine. How are these incredible structures created? How can a single coral that is only 3 millimeters long (about the size of the word "is" on this page) become a reef that may stretch for miles and weigh hundreds of tons? In this article, you'll learn how coral reefs form, what kind of life they harbor and why scientists say they may largely disappear in the coming century. On the next page, you'll learn more about the little guys responsible for starting those great chains of coral. The world's coral reefs are dying and this week a powerhouse group of environmentalists released a report indicating that despite their efforts, the situation is getting worse. Seventy-five percent of the world's coral reefs are in danger of further decay. Plenty of pressing causes, of course, see their awareness levels spike thanks to celebrity spokespeople and smart PR. In this instance, that's not happening. Does coral reef conservation just need better marketing? Reefs at Risk Revisited, released by the D.C.-based World Resources Institute, along with the UN, Conservation International, and a host of other partners, is an update from a 1998 report. The main new addition is a finding that human actions—overfishing, coastal development, and pollution—are the most direct and immediate threats to coral reefs. "This report serves as a wake-up call for policy-makers, business leaders, ocean managers, and others about the urgent need for greater protection for coral reefs," said Dr. Jane Lubchenco, under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. But it's also a wake-up call to environmental NGO's themselves: Perhaps they need to change their tactics. "Managing oceans" doesn't quite have the same bite as "save a life with a malaria-fighting bed net"—and the malaria cause has attracted the likes of Ashley Judd, Mandy Moore, and Alicia Keys. But who's speaking out for the reefs? With their beautiful schools of fish and eye-popping colors, coral reefs are a tangible face for the climate change cause, which, like malaria, will also cause mass human casualties—in the form of food shortage-induced hunger and forced migration. For now, the Nature Conservancy is on the right track, doing its part to give the environmental problem a human face, but it's got a long way to go before making a global impression. "At their core, reefs are about people as well as nature: ensuring stable food supplies, promoting recovery from coral bleaching, and acting as a magnet for tourist dollars," said Mark Spalding, senior marine scientist at the Nature Conservancy and a lead author of the report. "We need apply the knowledge we have to shore up existing protected areas, as well as to designate new sites where threats are highest, such as the populous hearts of the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, East Africa and the Middle East." The report also details the nine countries most at risk—Haiti, Grenada, Philippines, Comoros, Vanuatu, Tanzania, Kiribati, Fiji, and Indonesia—which for the most part are heavily frequented by international tourists. So there's an angle that could be employed by activists and campaigners. But in the end what the report's findings point to is that awareness and education are not enough—it might be time for a tactical change. Follow Fast Company on Twitter. The coral reef's zooxanthellae, or symbiotic algae, give it its color. When coral is stressed, it expels the algae and loses its color in a process called bleaching. Coral reefs are vulnerable to a variety of stressors. Even a one degree rise in temperature can damage coral, causing it to expel its symbiotic algae in a process known as coral bleaching. It's called bleaching because the algae is what gives coral its color. Without it, the coral takes on a stark white appearance. If the stress is prolonged, the algae will not return, and the coral will die. Aside from increased temperatures, several other factors can cause bleaching or other damage. Some of these threats are naturally occurring, like hurricanes and predators, while others are caused by humans, such as pollution and overfishing. The strong massive waves from storms like hurricanes and cyclones frequently damage reefs. The waves easily break off or flatten large portions of coral reefs. Along with storms, natural weather patterns like El Nino can negatively affect corals. The increased temperatures, altered salinity and increased rainfall are all stressors — lengthy periods of cold rainy weather tend to suppress coral growth. Coral has its share of predators, too. Crabs, marine worms, snails and barnacles all prey on coral polyps, destroying even their underlying limestone structure and making it impossible for future polyps to recolonize. One of corals' most colorful fish enemies, the parrotfish, is familiar to many divers who can immediately identify it by the characteristic chomping noise it makes as it eats away at the coral. Perhaps corals' greatest enemy, however, is humans. Not only are humans likely responsible to some extent for the rising water temperatures that cause coral bleaching, but fishing methods, pollution and even seemingly unrelated actions like deforestation harm coral. Blast fishing, which destroys coral by ripping it apart, is used in more than 40 countries. Steve Winter/National Geographic/Getty Images Fishing can be problematic for several reasons. Overfishing impacts coral by removing key species from the marine food chain. The methods used to catch fish can also be devastating. Cyanide fishing, for instance, is used by more than 15 countries and involves dumping cyanide onto reefs to stun fish for easy gathering. The cyanide poisons not only the fish but also the reef. Some fishermen also engage in blast fishing, or using explosives to stun fish. The explosions rip corals apart and cause nearby colonies to bleach. More than 40 countries allow blasting [source: NOAA] In addition, sediment runoff from farms, construction and deforestation can kill corals by clogging their mouths or by blocking sunlight. Likewise, pollutants and sewage entering the water increase the nutrients on which harmful algae and other coral competitors thrive, and increased competitors means less space for coral. Mining operations that scrape away at the reefs for limestone to use in road and building materials are bad news, too. Even well-meaning tourists and scuba divers may threaten reefs by taking "souvenirs" home with them or by inadvertently kicking the fragile reef with a fin. Fortunately, many groups are coming to the reefs' rescue by stepping up research and conservation efforts. More reefs are being designated as marine protection areas, some countries are enforcing stricter fishing oversight and some environmental organizations even give you the option of "adopting" a reef. Coral reefs are worth saving for a number of reasons. Their amazing beauty and diversity are only two of these. To learn more about coral reefs, dive into the links on the following page. Related HowStuffWorks Articles Gray, William. "Coral Reefs and Islands." Singapore: David & Charles, 1993. National Geographic. "Coral." 2008. (March 15, 2008) Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). "NOAA'S Coral Reef Information System." March, 13, 2008. (March 16, 2008) Nature Conservancy. "Coral Reefs of the Tropics: Facts About Coral Reefs." March 2008. (March 16, 2008) Rick. "Seven Underwater Wonders of the World." Thomason-Grant. 1992. Texas A&M University. "Ocean World: Coral reefs." 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