

Scientists say world's largest coral found near Solomon Islands

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A diver from National Geographic Pristine Seas measures the world's largest coral colony in the Solomon Islands. Photo: Manu San Félix/National Geographic Pristine Seas Photo: Manu San Félix/National Geographic Pristine Seas

Scientists have found the world's largest coral near the Solomon Islands in the Pacific Ocean. The scientists say that the coral is "pulsing with life and color."

The coral is so large that scientists initially thought they had stumbled across a giant shipwreck. It measures 111 feet wide and 104 feet long. That is longer than a blue whale, which is the largest animal on Earth. Scientists think that the coral is so large that it could "be seen from space."

In October, a team of National Geographic scientists was on a scientific expedition in the region when they found the coral. It has been growing for 300 years.



Image 1. Map: Newsela staff

"Mega Coral"

Corals are sea animals. They are made up of even tinier animals called polyps. A polyp has a soft body that is shaped like a tube with a mouth in the center. A single coral can be made up of hundreds to thousands of individual polyps.

"Just when we think there is nothing left to discover on planet Earth, we find a massive coral made of nearly

one billion little polyps," said Enric Sala. He is a marine ecologist. This is a scientist who studies the interactions between sea animals and their environment.

The scientists said the "mega coral" was three times bigger than the previous record holder. That coral is known as "Big Momma." It is also located in the Pacific Ocean.

Molly Timmers is a scientist who helped find the new coral. She said that Big Momma looks like "a huge scoop of ice cream." However, this new coral looks "as if the ice cream started to melt." She said it looks like the coral is spreading along the seafloor.

Coral In Danger

Coral can take hundreds of years to grow so large, attracting a wide variety of sea life that depend on each other. At the same time, coral is sensitive to changes in the ocean—specifically if the ocean gets hotter or has more acid in it. Both of these things are happening because of climate change. This is the significant change to the Earth's climate over a long period of time.

Today, climate change is largely caused by humans burning oil and gas for electricity and transportation. When this fuel is burned, it releases carbon dioxide gas. The gas is what is causing both the air and ocean to become warmer. It is also causing the oceans to have more acid in them, because of how the carbon dioxide interacts with water molecules.

Hotter and more acidic oceans have harmed many corals near the Solomon Islands and across the world.

Beacon Of Hope

This latest discovery offered a small glimmer of hope, the scientists said.

Eric Brown is a coral scientist. He said that corals in shallow waters in the region have been harmed due to warmer seas. But he said that seeing this large, healthy coral in deeper waters is a "beacon of hope."

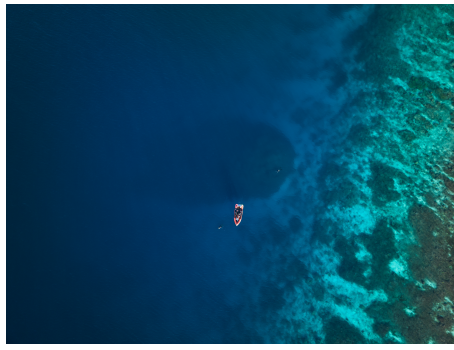


Image 2. The research boat is dwarfed by the size of the world's largest coral colony.

Photo: Steve Spence/National Geographic
Pristine Seas

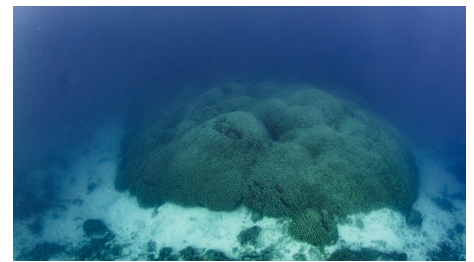


Image 3. The coral is thirty-four meters wide and thirty-two meters long. It is a complex network of coral polyps. This colony is estimated to have grown over three the past hundred years. Photo: Manu San Félix/National Geographic
Pristine Seas

The Solomon Islands are now known for their lush rainforests and pristine waters. The islands and their surrounding waters have been celebrated for their biodiversity. Biodiversity is the variety of living things, such as plants and animals, in a region.

Collin Beck is a diplomat from the Solomon Islands. He said there is still so much to learn about ocean life in the area. He also said that this new finding "opens doors of knowledge."

"More scientific research is needed to better understand our rich biodiversity and our planet," Beck said.



Image 4. Alan Friendlander and Eric Brown prepare for a dive to observe the giant coral. Photo: Caitlin Bailey/National Geographic Pristine Seas

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Coral In Danger." Which sentence from the section shows how the ocean gets more acid in it?
- (A) Coral can take hundreds of years to grow so large, attracting a wide variety of sea life that depend on each other.
 - (B) At the same time, coral is sensitive to changes in the ocean—specifically if the ocean gets hotter or has more acid in it.
 - (C) When this fuel is burned, it releases carbon dioxide gas.
 - (D) Hotter and more acidic oceans have harmed many corals near the Solomon Islands and across the world.
- 2 Read the section "Mega Coral." Which selection from the section supports the conclusion that the scientists were surprised by the size of the coral?
- (A) They are made up of even tinier animals called polyps. A polyp has a soft body that is shaped like a tube with a mouth in the center.
 - (B) "Just when we think there is nothing left to discover on planet Earth, we find a massive coral made of nearly one billion little polyps," said Enric Sala.
 - (C) This is a scientist who studies the interactions between sea animals and their environment.
 - (D) However, this new coral looks "as if the ice cream started to melt." She said it looks like the coral is spreading along the seafloor.
- 3 Which sentence from the article supports the main idea of the article?
- (A) It measures 111 feet wide and 104 feet long.
 - (B) The gas is what is causing both the air and ocean to become warmer.
 - (C) Biodiversity is the variety of living things, such as plants and animals, in a region.
 - (D) He said there is still so much to learn about ocean life in the area.

- 4 Read the paragraph from the article.

The scientists said the "mega coral" was three times bigger than the previous record holder. That coral is known as "Big Momma." It is also located in the Pacific Ocean.

Which statement summarizes the paragraph?

- (A) Scientists think the new coral's record will never be broken.
- (B) Scientists expect to find even bigger corals in the Pacific Ocean.
- (C) The mega coral was bigger than "Big Momma" but was not in the Pacific Ocean.
- (D) The mega coral was three times bigger than previous record holder "Big Momma."