

Too Precious to Wear

Q&A on Corals and Conservation

Q: What are corals?

A: Corals are living animals related to jellyfish and anemones. They thrive in environments ranging from shallow tropical waters to abyssal depths. An individual coral animal is called a polyp. Some polyps live alone while others live in colonies, building upon one another. As some members of the colony die, their hard skeletons remain, accumulating over time, providing permanent structures, called reefs, for the living tissue to reside. Coral reefs are the most diverse ecosystem in the ocean and are second only to tropical rainforests in terms of biological diversity.

Q: Why are corals important?

A: Corals are vital to a healthy ocean. Reefs provide food, reproduction areas and safe havens from predators for 25 percent of all marine fish species. Corals also provide people around the world with food, invaluable pharmaceuticals and economic benefits, all while protecting coastlines from destruction due to storms.

Q: How many types of corals are there?

A: The just over 5,000 known coral species on the planet can be divided into two types — hard corals and soft corals. The hard corals resemble rocks, boulders or tree trunks, and are known as the reef builders. The soft corals can look like tree branches or fans.

Q: Where are corals found?

Corals are found all over the world in shallow, tropical waters as well as on the deep, dark ocean floor. Shallow water coral reefs have adapted to warm water and rely on being close to sunlight for their survival. Other corals come from the deep sea and survive in cold waters without sunlight. The corals used in tropical fish tanks and as home décor primarily come from shallow water environments. Most precious corals used in jewelry come from the Mediterranean Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

Q: What are the chief threats facing corals?

A: Climate change, pollution, destructive fishing and overfishing are all contributing to the downward spiral of corals. When corals are removed from the ocean for use in jewelry, home décor and aquariums, it is harmful because corals are slow-growing animals that can take years to recover. After particularly destructive fishing - such as cyanide poisoning, bottom trawling and blast fishing - some populations may never again grow to their original size. All of these threats weaken corals, making them less likely to survive the impact of climate change.

Q: How are corals used?

A: Corals are removed from the ocean for many purposes, from aquariums to home decoration and jewelry to raw materials for road construction. The most valuable and widely traded corals used for jewelry in the world are red and pink corals, known as *Corallium*. Red and pink corals are popular in Europe and Asia as jewelry and art, but the United States is the world's largest documented consumer of precious red corals with more than 26 million pieces imported from 2001 to 2006. In the United States, raw coral commands an auction price of \$150 to \$900 per kilogram. The rarity of these precious corals contributes to their high price and coveted status. The American market is also responsible for the purchasing of 80 percent of the live coral taken from reefs (more than 400,000 pieces a year).

Q: Why are you launching *Too Precious to Wear*?

A: Coral reefs represent one of the most important ecosystems in our ocean, yet scientific information indicates that they are in serious decline. They have been fished for jewelry and art for more than 5,000 years. The time is now for the fashion and design industries to play a role in the recovery of corals by using their voices to call for better coral protection. It is also vital that government officials dedicate more resources to coral research, monitoring and conservation so that scientists can determine those species most at risk and identify solutions for their recovery.

Q: What is the current condition of coral reefs throughout the world?

A: Scientists say that we have already lost 20 percent of the world's coral reefs, and they predict that another 24 percent may be lost in the next 30 years if human impacts are not reduced. Coral coverage in the Asia-Pacific region, home to most of the world's reefs, and previously thought to be doing well, has dropped 22 percent in the past 20 years.

Q: Why are scientists and the fashion industry working together on this issue?

A: Launching during the 2008 International Year of the Reef (IYOR), *Too Precious To Wear* is working with scientists and fashion industry elite to:

- Increase awareness of the plight of corals;
- Reduce purchases of real corals;
- Pass stronger national and international coral protection measures.

Q: Are there current restrictions in place to protect corals?

A: There are no binding regulations that will ensure corals' survival, and this must change. Two regulatory processes could be made stronger to better protect corals from harm. At the international level, government officials who represent the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) should be urged to pass an Appendix II listing for *Corallium*, which would establish a global trade monitoring program for this important marine animal. On the national level, Congress could reauthorize a strengthened U.S. coral Reef Conservation Act, originally formed in 2005, rather than letting it languish. This is an opportunity to support research and management of coral reefs, with respect to issues such as coral trade pressures and reef destruction. There are many other important opportunities to address the issues of overfishing, acidification and climate change in bills currently before Congress.

Q: What can the fashion industry do to help corals?

A: The fashion industry can be a powerful voice for stronger coral protection. *Too Precious To Wear* encourages the fashion, jewelry and design industries to consider removing corals from their product lines in favor of coral-inspired products. By highlighting these responsible decisions and developing coral inspired motif products for their collections, the fashion and design industries can help ensure corals' survival.

Q: What can consumers do to help corals?

Living without coral does not cause any hardship, and it's not depriving us of anything we can't easily live without. Consumers can do their part for coral conservation simply by refusing to purchase live or real coral.

A: There are many coral inspired alternatives that celebrate the beauty of the ocean without harming it.

Q: What are coral inspired products?

Decorative items and coral-like jewelry can be made of resin, wax or wood. Consumers that love the look of coral and value a healthy ocean can have both if they make informed choices.