



# Healthy Reefs, Healthy People

## What are coral reefs?

Coral reefs are created by millions of tiny polyps, which are soft bodied animals without a backbone. They form large carbonate structures by extracting calcium from surrounding seawater. This is used to create a hardened framework, for protection and growth as well as the foundations for homes of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of other species.

## Did you know?

- The fastest growing coral takes a year to grow 15 cm but most grow less than 2.5 cm per year. Some deep-sea colonies have lived more than 4000 years. Most of the reefs we know today took decades or even centuries of polyps secreting calcium carbonate to form their enormous hard structures.
- Different types of corals exist and they can be found in deep waters too – these corals thrive in cold, dark water at depths of up to 6,000 m. Both stony corals and soft corals can be found in the deep sea.

## Why are coral reefs important to us?

**Our reefs feed our people:** 70% of Pacific islanders' protein is sourced from near-shore pelagic and inshore reef and lagoon fisheries. Seafood is also a source for essential amino acids, vitamins, minerals and unique fatty acids, not found in terrestrial organisms.

**Reefs protect our homes:** Reef structures play a vital role in reducing the impact of storm surges and coastal erosion by dissipating the energy of strong waves by an average of 97% before they reach the shoreline.

**Healthy reefs store valuable resources:** they provide important compounds for medicines such as anti-tumour medication derived from sea squirts and painkillers from cone snails, and this rich ecosystem could contain other benefits that have yet to be discovered.

**The value of reefs is extensive:** The tourism industries of Pacific island countries amounts to over USD 4 billion. Healthy corals will continue to attract tourism, this is important as marine based tourism alone accounts for over USD 570 million each year in Fiji.

## What can we do to protect and conserve our reefs?

- Be mindful of even the little things that could impact the reefs, avoid using harmful sunscreen, which contain oxybenzone, use ecofriendly alternatives.
- Practice good waste management behaviour as mismanagement on land not only impacts soil but also water systems. Avoid walking or anchoring on coral reef, please don't destroy it.
- Respect local and traditional fishing bans such as the *bul* in Palau and the *ra'ui* in the Cook Islands.
- Encourage good ecotourism, support educational programmes about the importance of healthy reefs.

*Let's all work together to protect our coral reefs. Have that Pacific conversation today.*



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