



Coral PLIGHT

Extinction Threatens Marine Organism

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Twenty-five miles off the southern coast of Belize lies one of the most naturally beautiful and diverse marine ecosystems in the world. Tiny living organisms called corals make up this grand marine habitat that stretches one hundred eighty-six miles north. It is known as the Belize Barrier Reef and it is just one of the many biologically diverse coral ecosystems that make up the world's oceans.

In 2009 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) added the Belize Barrier Reef to the List of World Heritage in Danger. What Charles Darwin called "the most remarkable reef in the West Indies" in 1842, is now internationally recognized as facing environmental devastation.

Coral ecosystems provide a habitat for twenty-five percent of all marine species in the world (over 4,000 different species of fish), including over 5,000 coral species. Corals are found all over the world in shallow,

tropical waters and in the dark, depths of the ocean. They are a vital source of food for the billions of people who depend on them and they protect coastlines from hurricanes and erosion. In addition, they support strong economies as fisheries, tourist attractions, and they may offer new pharmaceutical compounds to combat disease. Yet consumers, buyers, and retailers alike continue to covet live corals to fill aquariums and dead corals for use in jewelry, fashion accessories and home décor. The United States alone imports 129 metric tons of dead coral and one million pieces of live coral animals annually, according to a report by "Too Precious to Wear."

Environmental threats pose additional challenges to coral reef survival. Greenhouse gas emissions has caused more acidic oceans; over harvesting has effected the density of coral and has caused a reduction in colony size; and rising sea temperatures has led to recurrent bouts of coral bleaching; however, there is hope on the horizon. A report by "Too Precious to Wear" revealed that scientists believe corals will have a better chance of surviving the threat of climate change if consumer demand, pollution, and over-fishing is reduced.

Jewelers are embracing the role and influence over consumer habits. In 2002, Tiffany & Co. became the first major jewelry company in the US to put in place a formal "no coral sales" policy, based on the premise that "there is no sustainable way to harvest corals without damaging critical marine ecosystems," said Anisa Kamadoli Costa, vice president of corporate responsibility

at Tiffany & Co. This marked considerable success for coral conservation in the US, the world's largest documented consumer of Corallium, red and pink corals: one of the most valuable wildlife commodities.

Today, Tiffany & Co. strives to educate consumers on the plight of corals. They support the passage of the US Coral Reef Conservation Act, which would ensure funding for scientific research and conservation efforts. In March 2010, the proposal to list red and pink corals on the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) Appendix II failed. But, Ms. Kosta remains hopeful. She observed, "There has been rejuvenation in the marine conservation community and many organizations are now working with individual countries, such as the United States, to try to reduce the trade in red and pink coral." SeaWeb is one such organization; Tiffany & Co. works closely with their "Too Precious to Wear" campaign, to create a demand for coral conservation.

The "Too Precious to Wear" coral conservation campaign, a program of SeaWeb, is dedicated to highlighting the threats posed to coral by consumer demand. They work with influential jewelers and designers to further showcase ways that jewelry can be beautiful without the use of these precious marine organisms. Campaign efforts include scientific research, consumer activism, and training. Overall, they are driven by their mission to conserve coral ecosystems, and are doing so by raising global awareness and a push for international legislation.

Like many environmental issues, awareness is the first step to bringing about change: "Corals are often mistaken for plants or rocks even though they are living animals," Ms. Kosta said. "As we educate more people on the crisis of corals, they will understand that the beauty of the sea is something to be protected, not worn." It is up to consumers to curb their conspicuous consumption of these marine organisms. Corals belong in their natural habitat, in the sea.**

TOO PRECIOUS TO WEAR
www.tooprecioustowear.org

SEA WEB
www.seaweb.org

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Gorgonian coral, Belize Barrier Reef
 PHOTO CREDIT: Jennifer Sharp



Tiffany & Co. window with an "Under the" theme.
 PHOTO CREDIT: Joe Schildhorn



Tiffany & Co. coral shaped brooch by designer Paloma Picasso; Blue chalcedony, chrysoprase, diamonds and 18 karat yellow gold. PHOTO CREDIT: Steven Crawford