

Project Oceanography
Coral Reefs II:
Coral Reef Biology & Ecology

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Coral reefs are the largest animal-built structures on earth. In fact they are the only living thing that one can see on earth from space.

Coral reefs are built by piling up the skeletons of coral over thousands of years.

The building blocks of reefs, the corals, are a remarkable partnership between animals and plants. The scientific name of the group including corals is *Anthozoa*, or "flower-like animals."

Like plants, coral reproduces by breaking off and re-attaching. But, they also reproduce sexually and the young, or larvae, spend a considerable time floating in the sea before attaching.

Once attached the young coral cannot move and it immediately begins to grow by depositing limestone in beautiful patterns. Mounding corals grow slowly (less than 1 inch per year); branching can grow rapidly (more than one foot a year).

Coral reefs are like ocean rain forests. They have more different kinds of animals and plants than any other place in the ocean. In the confusion of so many different animals, how do they sort themselves out and recognize each other?

In Spite of their massive size and old age, coral reefs are vulnerable to human damage. *Three things that damage corals the most are: Soils from the clearing and construction; pollution from sewage; over fishing.*

One way we can protect coral reefs is by marine parks and reserves. *Florida has one of the newest and largest of these called the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.*