

Danger on the Reef

Scientists predict dire bleaching in the Great Barrier Reef.

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The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), part of the United States Department of Commerce, has warned corals in the Great Barrier Reef may face heightened chances of bleaching over Australia's summer months. The predictions are made in the NOAA's Coral Reef Watch Coral Bleaching Thermal Stress Outlook for December 2009 through March 2010 and are based on satellite temperature readings.

The NOAA suggests that the near future may be dire for corals in the Great Barrier Reef and warns that corals may potentially experience "severe bleaching" over the next four months.

However, experts with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) say their immediate projections for bleaching covering the next four months are not as dire as those of the NOAA. Their observations are made locally, while the NOAA relied on satellite data for their bleaching threat predictions.

This doesn't mean the GBRMPA is optimistic about trends in coral bleaching. The GBRMPA's first Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report, published in November 2009, suggests the bleaching threat to the Great Barrier Reef's corals is very high over the next few years.

Temperature trends in Australia are a definite cause for concern. Land-based temperature observations indicate that 2009 contained the six warmest months on record, and the water temperatures in the winter months were above average, as well. Australia also saw a near-record rise in sea surface temperatures in 2009.

We'll see how this turns out. Hopefully, the NOAA's forecast will prove overly pessimistic. Keep in mind, in the past the NOAA has made dire predictions of potential bleaching that they have later reduced. This isn't to say they aren't practicing good science, but only that they've had to revise their projections once new information came in.

Also, see my past blog entry "Reefs Show Signs of Rallying" about the unknowns when it comes to coral bleaching, especially in the Great Barrier Reef. While there is some uncertainty as to how bad bleaching will be, there is definitely great cause for concern.

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