

Changing our approach to corals

Raising awareness among coastal communities is a key step in promoting the conservation and protection of aquatic ecosystems, particularly coral reefs.



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Field trip to the Étang Salé lagoon in Saint Leu, Reunion Island.

Coral reefs are suffering as a result of human pressures and climate change, leading to a loss of biodiversity in coral ecosystems and associated activities such as fishing and tourism. Although scientists have long been sounding the alarm, people are often poorly informed about the issues surrounding these ecosystems. It is therefore crucial to encourage the sharing of knowledge to raise awareness among society, particularly the younger generations, of the significance of the biodiversity of coral reefs and the importance of protecting them.

In the Indian Ocean, this observation has encouraged scientists to develop awareness-raising tools designed to change the way local communities see coral reefs. For example, they have designed an educational kit to make scientific concepts more accessible, and have forged links between the arts and sciences. Even more originally, they have drawn inspiration from an educational initiative that began in 2012 in the Marquesas Islands, where the scientists' stories inspired schoolchildren to create the very first marine educational area. This innovative scheme, which encourages learning through an educational and civic-minded approach, has since spread around the world. In 2016, it was introduced on Reunion Island to raise children's awareness of the vulnerability of the island's coral reefs.

“By managing a maritime area themselves, students become actively involved in preserving the coastal environment. Research shows that marine educational areas are being used to educate the younger generations, in the hope that they will become responsible, informed adults capable of making the right decisions to protect the coral reef socio-ecosystem while taking ancestral knowledge into account.”

Georgeta Stoica, University of Mayotte, France



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Discovering reefs through a game, Madagascar.

... In the Indian Ocean, ocean education is flourishing,
in particular with the establishment
of marine educational areas ...

In practical terms, marine educational areas are created at the request of a teacher. Pupils discover coral reefs both in the classroom and underwater, with the support of scientists and partners associations. Then, it is up to the teacher and the pupils to identify the issues to be addressed and implement solutions in collaboration with the local authorities: for example, planting local trees to prevent erosion and run-off, thereby reducing the turbidity in the water which is harmful to corals.

The programme has been so successful that it is now extended to the islands of the Western Indian Ocean (Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles). The aim is for the children involved in the programme to become ambassadors for the coral reefs in their communities, and to be aware of their ability to have an impact on this submarine world. An invisible world that provides many ecosystem benefits, starting with protecting coastlines from erosion.

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OUR SHARED OCEAN

Science in the Global South
for a Sustainable World

IRD Éditions
Collection Grands enjeux
Marseille, 2025

Editorial management

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Cover photo

Children fishing on a reef flat in Reao, French Polynesia. © IRD/S.Andréfouët

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ISBN Papier: 978-2-7099-3070-3

ISBN PDF: 978-2-7099-3071-0

ISBN Open/epub: 978-2-7099-3072-7

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