

China boom savages coral reefs, study finds

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This file photo shows the sunset in Sansha, China's newest city, anchored on a remote tropical island in the South China Sea, on July 20, 2012. China's economic boom has seen its coral reefs shrink by at least 80 percent over the past 30 years, according to a joint Australian study, with researchers describing "grim" levels of damage and loss.

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Scientists from the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral [Reef Studies](#) and the South China Sea Institute of Oceanology said their survey of [mainland China](#) and South China Sea reefs showed alarming degradation.

"We found that coral abundance has declined by at least 80 percent over the past 30 years on coastal fringing reefs along the Chinese mainland and adjoining Hainan Island," said the study, published in the latest edition of the journal *Conservation Biology*.

"On offshore atolls and archipelagos claimed by six countries in the South China Sea, coral cover has declined from an average of greater than 60 percent to around 20 percent within the past 10-15 years," it added.

[Coastal development](#), pollution and overfishing linked to the Asian giant's aggressive economic expansion were the major drivers, the authors said, describing a "grim picture of decline, degradation and destruction".

"China's ongoing economic expansion has exacerbated many wicked environmental problems, including widespread [habitat loss](#) due to coastal development, unsustainable levels of fishing and pollution," the study said.

Coral loss in the South China Sea—where reefs stretch across some 30,000 square kilometres (12,000 square miles)—was compounded by poor governance stemming from competing territorial claims.

Some marine parks aimed at conservation had been established but study author Terry Hughes said they were too small and too far apart to arrest the decline in coral cover.

"The window of opportunity to recover the reefs of the South [China Sea](#) is closing rapidly, given the state of degradation revealed in this study," he said.

More than 30 years of unbridled economic growth has left large parts of China environmentally devastated, with the nation suffering from some of the most severe air, water and land pollution in the world, global studies have shown.

Such destruction has led to widespread local frustration and a number of protests, some of which have succeeded in getting proposed new factories and facilities cancelled or postponed.

The government has laid out a road map to transform China's development mode to one that is more environmentally friendly and less dependent on headlong economic growth.

The [South China](#) Sea is strategically significant, home to some of the world's most important shipping lanes and believed to be rich in resources.

China claims most of the sea including waters near the shores of its neighbours. Rival claimants include Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam, and tensions over the issue have flared in recent years.

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