

In graveyard of dead coral in Pacific, hope and life bloom

November 18 2016, by Seth Borenstein



In this photo provided by Kim Cobb, shows Georgia Tech climate scientist Kim Cobb in November at the remote Pacific island of Kiritimati, finding a bit of hope and life amid what in April was a ghost town of dead coral. Cobb used bags and drills to examine the coral and take core samples. Yellow coral is healthy, white is sick and some of the other colors are actually algae over dead coral. (Alyssa Atwood, NOAA/Georgia Tech via AP)

In a ghost town of dead coral off a remote Pacific island, scientists have found a bit more life.

In excursions a year ago and then last April, scientists examined the normally stunning [coral](#) reefs around the island of Kiritimati and pronounced it mostly a boneyard of dead coral. About 85 percent of the coral was dead, 10 percent was sick and bleached but still technically alive, and only 5 percent was doing OK.

The same scientists returned this month and found that 6 to 7 percent of the coral is alive and not bleached, said University of Victoria coral [reef](#) scientist Julia Baum, speaking by Skype from the island.

"We left with a sense of dread and came back with a renewed purpose because there are some corals that literally came back from the brink," said Georgia Tech climate scientist Kim Cobb, who returned from the expedition earlier. "It's the best we could have hoped for."

Many of the fish that rely on the reef and had been absent seem to be back, Cobb said.

Hot water—mostly from El Nino, the natural occasional warming of the Pacific that changes weather worldwide, and man-made global warming—had made the area one of the worst hit coral spots in the world. Later, nearby Jarvis Island was even more damaged. And the death of 85 percent of the coral of the better known and much larger Great Barrier Reef has been reported, said C. Mark Eakin, coral reef watch coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.



In this photo provided by Kim Cobb, shows Georgia Tech climate scientist Kim Cobb in November at the remote Pacific island of Kiritimati, finding a bit of hope and life amid what in April was a ghost town of dead coral. Cobb used bags and drills to examine the coral and take core samples. Yellow coral is healthy, white is sick and some of the other colors are actually algae over dead coral. (Alyssa Atwood, NOAA/Georgia Tech via AP)

"But despite this mass mortality, there are a few small signs of hope," Baum said. "It's clear that coral reefs have great resilience and the coral here is trying to recover."

Not only has some of the bleached coral recovered, she said, but "there are coral babies that have settled on the reef sometime in the last year to year and half and these are the reef's best hope for recovery."

A study published Thursday in the journal *Current Biology* goes back more than a million years and finds that even during mass die-offs, [coral species](#) are able to rebound.

Eakin points to Scott reef off western Australia where 12 years after the damaging 1998 El Nino coral die-off, nearly half the original reef revived. But it was damaged again by the recent El Nino.

Even after the recovery seen at Kiritimati, Baum is wary: "It's like having a patient who is very sick and instead of letting them recover we keep infecting them with more and more illnesses. There's only so much that any person—or any natural system—can take."



In this photo provided by Kim Cobb, shows Georgia Tech climate scientist Kim Cobb in November at the remote Pacific island of Kiritimati, finding a bit of hope and life amid what in April was a ghost town of dead coral. Cobb used bags

and drills to examine the coral and take core samples. Yellow coral is healthy, white is sick and some of the other colors are actually algae over dead coral. (Alyssa Atwood, NOAA/Georgia Tech via AP)

© 2016 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: In graveyard of dead coral in Pacific, hope and life bloom (2016, November 18)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-11-graveyard-dead-coral-pacific-life.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
