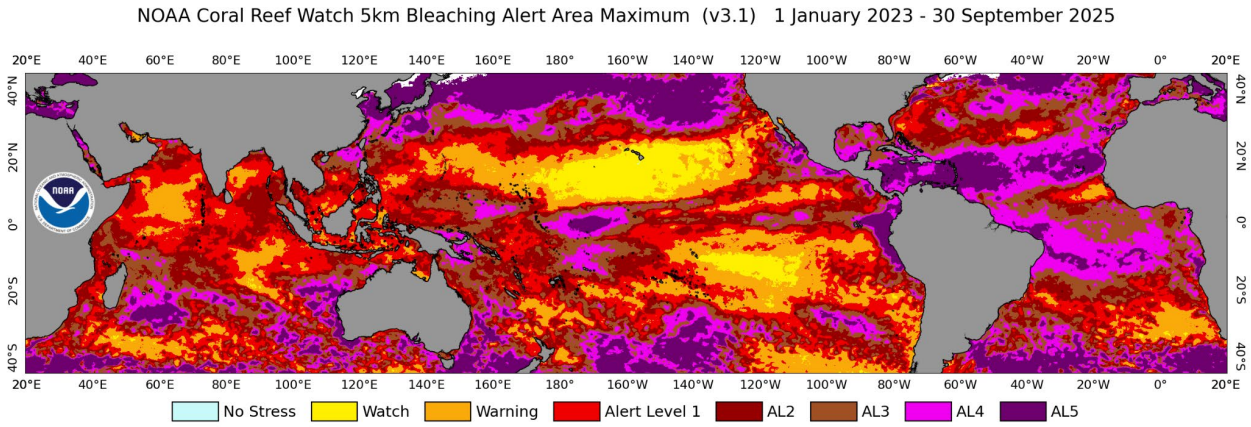
The Death of Coral Reefs

By Jim Lanier

Coral reefs are declining across the globe. According to a 2025 article from Earth.Org, journalist and editor Martina Igini reports, “Since 2023, the world’s corals have been enduring the largest mass coral bleaching ever recorded, affecting 84 percent of reefs.” But what is “bleaching”? Coral bleaching occurs when the ocean becomes too warm for corals and they expel their algae. As a result, corals become “bleached” and are left completely white. While corals *can* survive and recover from bleaching, the likelihood is low.

Climate change is the primary cause of coral bleaching. According to the National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service, “Corals start to become stressed and bleach when the [sea surface temperature] is one degree Celsius warmer than the highest monthly [average] temperature.” When coral reefs become bleached, death usually follows. In one large and significant bleached coral reef in the Pacific, living coral populations dropped by 58 percent.



But why is this important? Coral reefs provide habitats for one-third of all marine life. Countless millions if not *billions* of people depend on marine food chains and resources for nutrition and other necessities. Reefs also provide possible breakthrough treatments for common and dangerous diseases. In addition, the death of coral reefs can lead to coastal flooding. According to the Coastal and Marine Hazards and Resources Program, projected degradation of coral reefs in Florida alone could lead to an additional $823.6 million in damages annually.

Coral reefs provide jobs, food, and coastal protection, which provides the global economy with – by some estimates – *trillions* of dollars in benefits every year. When reefs disappear, the benefits they provide disappear, too.

The dying of coral reefs is proof that climate change is not a problem for the future; it is a problem for the present. However, the threat to coral reefs is just one piece of the puzzle. Along with coral bleaching, other ecological disasters are predicted if temperatures rise one and

a half degrees Celsius above pre-Industrial levels. According to New York Times climate reporter David Gelles, “The world has already warmed nearly one and a half degrees and appears on track to blow past two degrees by the end of the century, if not sooner.” Environmental crises exacerbated or outright caused by climate change are already underway: droughts, wildfires, heavy rainfall, intensified storms, coastal flooding and erosion, food shortages, mass migrations, and melting ice sheets in Greenland and West Antarctica, the fresh water from which could slow or shut down the Gulf Stream and other major ocean currents, which would trigger weather and climate changes that make what we’re already seeing seem mild.

Climate change is a very real consequence of humanity's past and present actions. Although there is no guaranteed prediction or precise countdown for a “doomsday” scenario, humans have already pushed our atmosphere beyond several tipping points and are losing wondrous, interconnected, and economically crucial resources, including coral reefs and more.