

# current

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**CURRENT LOG** *The least-explored forests on Earth aren't in rain-drenched Amazonia or the lofty Himalayas; they're in the oceans' depths. These deep-sea "forests" of gorgonian corals and reefs of stony corals were nearly unknown to science just a few years ago. But now scientists are finding that some of the sea's most biologically diverse ecosystems are coral communities occurring far below depths where people used to think that corals dwell. Indeed, the deep sea is home to thousands of coral species. Most are tiny, solitary cup corals. But some deep-sea bamboo coral colonies can reach 33 feet tall, and several kinds of deep-sea stony corals can form miles-long structurally complex reef ecosystems with hundreds of associated animal species. These deep-sea forests and reefs are the most exciting new marine discoveries since scientists first laid eyes on hydrothermal vents in 1977.*

*Some deep-sea corals cling to outcroppings on continental slopes, the steep margins of the continents. Others coat the crests and shoulders of thousands of seamounts, mysterious, mainly extinct undersea volcanoes. One thing is clear: the scientific exploration of deep-sea corals and their associated sponges, fishes, and other species has scarcely begun.*

*Sadly, just as scientists are making exciting new discoveries around the world, we are finding places where corals had thrived until years or even months ago that are now fields of rubble or rocks shorn bare of corals and other life. Off Tasmania and Norway, Nova Scotia, and Florida, we are seeing places where somebody arrived before the scientists: trawlers that dragged the seafloor for orange roughy, cod, redfish, or rock shrimp. In doing so, they ripped gorgonians from the seabed and smashed glass-fragile stony corals to smithereens.*

*Marine Conservation Biology Institute (MCBI) has worked for years by bringing scientists together to document the distribution and value of deep-sea corals and the impact of trawling on them. We've studied their potential as sources of pharmaceuticals and mapped their distributions. And we've worked to secure protection of our nation's deep-sea coral ecosystems.*

*Our staff scientists and policy experts recently celebrated when the North Pacific Fishery Management Council—with some nudging from Oceana, The Ocean Conservancy, and the Alaska Marine Conservation Council—declared a huge area surrounding Alaska's Aleutian Islands off-limits to bottom trawling, barring the most destructive fishing method from the most vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems. I commend the scientists, conservationists, commercial fishermen, and government officials who made this happen, and hope that this sets a new standard, demonstrating that some ecosystems are so important to biodiversity and fisheries that we will all work together to protect them.*

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