

Underwater Bushfire” Ravages Ningaloo Reef in Record-Setting Bleaching Event

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Australia's Ningaloo Reef, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the world's largest fringing reefs, is facing a severe coral bleaching crisis as a prolonged marine heatwave sweeps across Western Australia. Scientists and locals alike describe the damage as unprecedented, spanning vast areas for months and threatening the future of this iconic ecosystem.

Stretching over 260km off the north-west coast, Ningaloo has long been celebrated for vibrant corals, whale sharks, manta rays, and reef sharks. But this summer, sea surface temperatures up to 4 °C above average have caused bleaching of reefs on both Australia's western and eastern coasts for the first time, Paul Gamblin of the Australian Marine Conservation Society warned, likening it to a raging underwater bushfire that has persisted for months.

The mass bleaching is part of the fourth global coral bleaching event, which has affected over 80 per cent of reefs in tropical regions since early 2023. In early 2025, aerial and in-water surveys by the DBCA and the Australian Institute of Marine Science confirmed severe bleaching across both shallow and deep reefs at Ningaloo. Dr. Kate Quigley of the Minderoo Foundation described the event as "unprecedented," noting even typically resilient, slow-growing corals are now bleaching.

Despite some older corals experiencing mortality rates of 1–5 per cent, scientists caution that the full extent of damage may only become clear over the next several months. Dr. Tom Holmes of DBCA emphasised ongoing monitoring: "Corals can remain bleached for extended periods and follow-up surveys are required in six to 12 months to determine the full impact".

Tourists and local operators are already feeling the emotional and economic toll. British–South African snorkeler Jenna–Rae Clark described Ningaloo's once-vibrant corals as "a corpse... grey and lifeless". Conservation diver Sara Morgillo, who relocated from Perth, shared how people were "crying in the water... upset," while also reminding visitors there are still healthy areas worth seeing.

Marine heatwaves that began in late 2024 have also wrought havoc beyond coral bleaching, leading to fish kills and ecosystem stress. Temperatures remained abnormally high from December through April, making it the longest marine heatwave on record in that region.

The impact on Ningaloo's reef system is profound. Scientists warn that repeated bleaching without sufficient recovery time could lead to long-term reef decline. Dr. Quigley expressed deep concern that prolonged warming poses a serious mortality risk. "If it's bad enough, the corals will die," she warned.

While recovery is possible in some areas, Coral Bay's famed bommie shows signs of resilience. Researchers stress proactive measures are urgently needed. As Frazer

McGregor, coral ecologist and tour operator, urged, “We need to be active in managing a resource that is a public resource”.

The Ningaloo bleaching should serve as a sobering reminder of the fragility of marine ecosystems in the face of climate change. For Australia and the global community, the reef’s fate underscores the necessity of urgent, meaningful action, including protecting key habitats and reducing greenhouse gas emissions before these underwater treasures slip beyond recovery.