



# Coral gardens

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**The annual OSPAR Commission meeting, which takes place in Brest, has included the deep water habitat coral gardens in the OSPAR list of threatened and/or declining species and habitats**

## **For how long have we known about cold water corals?**

Although fishermen have known about the presence of corals in the cooler waters of the North-East Atlantic for several centuries, the first scientific records of cold water corals date from the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, and cold-water corals were observed during XIX<sup>th</sup> century off Great Britain and Iberian Peninsula by the interdisciplinary expedition of HMS CHALLENGER. It was the first time scientists collected deep water coral specimen in the North-East Atlantic. Recent technological progress in oceanic exploration has allowed scientific observation of both coral reefs and coral gardens in cold waters.

## **What are coral gardens?**

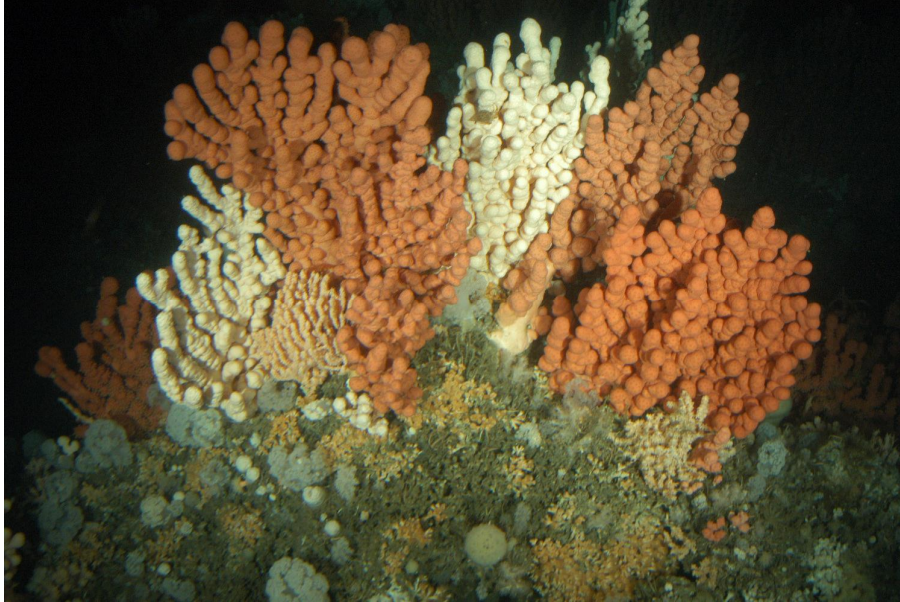
Coral gardens are colonies of corals which don't build external hard skeleton. These marine animals are also called "soft coral" and build their colonies by "budding", e.g. by growing like plants. The term "coral garden" was first used in Alaska to describe them. Their nutrition is based on particules, plankton and sometimes small crustaceans.

In a coral garden, several coral species are found ; gorgonians, leather corals (Alcyonacea), sea pens (Pennatulacea)

Coral gardens host rich and complex ecosystems, which detailed scientific studies have just started to understand.

The habitat can also host sponge species, star fishes, molluscs, crustaceans and deep-water fish. Some of coral species from coral garden are also both habitat and prey for fish and invertebrates.

The density of coral organisms in the habitat depend on physical and geomorphological conditions (depth, substrate, currents etc.). The latest scientific missions observed up to 700 colonies per 100m<sup>2</sup>.



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### **Where are coral gardens found?**

In OSPAR area, coral gardens have been observed along continental margins, on seamounts and on the continental shelf. Coral gardens can be found in waters as shallow as 30 m (in Norwegian fjords) and down to several thousand meters on Open Ocean. Coral gardens can grow on a wide range of soft and hard seabed.

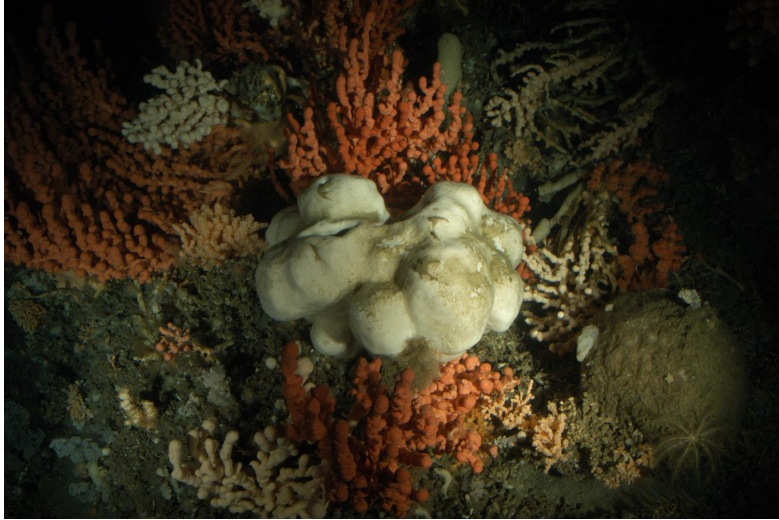
They live in darkness, with temperatures between 3 and 8°C, and sometimes in warmer water for instance around the Azores.

### **Why have coral gardens been included in the OSPAR List?**

In 2003, the Ministerial Meeting of the OSPAR Commission in Bremen, the Ministers and the Member of the European Commission declare in the statement:

"We are particularly concerned about the status of vulnerable cold-water coral reefs, many of which are threatened with destruction. Bearing in mind the ecological importance of these reefs and the practical irreversibility of their damage, we shall take immediate measures to protect coral reefs from further damage due to use of active fishing gear on the reefs. Furthermore, we shall ensure that steps are taken by 2005 to identify additional threats to the cold-water reefs and that measures are taken to protect the reefs against these threats."

Even if coral gardens mainly occur in deep waters, they are subject of maritime human activities, such as fishing and the offshore oil industry. Their balance is fragile and regeneration after damage can be extremely long when considering a whole garden.



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### **What is the OSPAR list?**

The OSPAR Strategy on the Protection and Conservation of the Ecosystems and Biological Diversity of the Maritime Area, the implementing tool of Annex V to the OSPAR convention, provides that the OSPAR Commission will assess which species and habitats in the OSPAR maritime area need to be protected. The OSPAR List of threatened and/or declining species and habitats, originally adopted in 2003, has been developed for the purpose of guiding the OSPAR Commission on setting priorities for future priorities in its work on protection and conservation of marine biodiversity. The list is based upon nominations submitted to the OSPAR Commission by Contracting Parties and observers. The evidence used to support the inclusion of a species or habitat on the list has been compiled into a justification report, which will be published on the OSPAR website.

### **What does the inclusion of coral gardens on the OSPAR List mean?**

The extension of the OSPAR List allows OSPAR to set a high priority for its further work on these species. Inclusion of a species or habitats on the OSPAR List has the following implications: OSPAR Contracting Parties are urged to take the need for protection of a species or habitat into account in their work to develop Marine Protected Areas as part of the OSPAR network of MPAs; the attention of other management authorities responsible for human activities is drawn to the need for protection of these species or habitats. This should be taken into account when deciding any management measures. OSPAR will develop further products to raise awareness and educate on the need for protection of these species and habitats. OSPAR will continue to further analyse the need for action either at the level of the OSPAR Commission or Contracting Parties or the need to draw specific questions to the attention of other competent authorities.

#### **Note for editors**

1. The OSPAR Commission was set up by the 1992 OSPAR Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic, which unified and up-dated the 1972 Oslo and 1974 Paris Conventions. It brings together the governments of Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, together with the European Community.
2. The OSPAR Commission would like to thank the organisations and individuals who have kindly given permission for their photographic material to be used for the press release. These photos are not downloadable and under no circumstances should they be reproduced. Anyone wishing to use any image should contact the author directly.