



Local and foreign tourists snorkel in the Red Sea waters above a coral reef near Egypt's Red Sea resort city of Sharm El-Sheikh at the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula. The Red Sea is home to some 209 different types of coral reefs, according to Egypt's environment ministry. — AFP photos

# IN EGYPT'S RED SEA, CORALS FADE AS OCEANS WARM



Scuba divers dive in the Red Sea waters by a coral reef near Egypt's resort city of Sharm El-Sheikh at the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula.

Standing on a boat bobbing gently in the Red Sea, Egyptian diving instructor Mohamed Abdelaziz looks on as tourists snorkel amid the brilliantly colored corals, a natural wonder now under threat from climate change. "If they disappear, we'll disappear with them," he says of the vibrant corals on the reef, a species-rich ecosystem just below the turquoise waters that is beloved by diving enthusiasts worldwide.

Coral reefs - often dubbed the "rainforests of the oceans" for their rich biodiversity - are under threat everywhere as rising sea temperatures and acidification cause catastrophic "bleaching" events. Along with pollution and dynamite fishing, global warming wiped out 14 percent of the world's coral reefs between 2009 and 2018, says a new survey by the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network, the biggest ever carried out.

Some studies have suggested that many species of coral in the Red Sea - which is also bordered by the Saudi peninsula, Sudan and

Eritrea - are unusually heat-resistant, but local professionals say they have already witnessed the damage. "We can see the effects of global warming before our eyes," said Islam Mohsen, 37, another local diving instructor at the resort town of Sharm El-Sheikh. "We can see the coral discoloring and turning white."

## Biodiversity hotspots

Coral reefs cover only a tiny fraction - 0.2 percent - of the ocean floor, but they are home to at least a quarter of all marine animals and plants. The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden boast the most biologically diverse coral reef communities outside of Southeast Asia. The Red Sea - with just over five percent of the world's coral reefs - is home to 209 types of coral, according to Egypt's environment ministry. The new global survey said that live hard coral cover in the region fluctuated over recent decades but declined overall, from 36.1 percent in 1997 to 34.3 percent in 2019.