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

Causes for the degraded reefs varied by location but included tourism activities, coastal development, land runoff and overfishing, the report said. Steps have been taken in Egypt to protect reefs and marine life that are crucial to the local tourism sector. Egypt's Chamber of Diving and Water Sports - which oversees 269 diving centers and over 2,900 professional divers - has protected fragile areas with buoys to keep boats from mooring. It has also suspended beginners' diving classes in some areas to allow damaged reefs to recover. But the largest looming threat, far harder to fix, is global warming.

Photo shows a view of a coral reef near Egypt's Red Sea resort city of Sharm El-Sheikh at the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula.

Marine heatwaves

Oceans absorb more than 90 percent of the excess heat from greenhouse gas emissions, shielding land surfaces but generating huge, long-lasting marine heatwaves. These are pushing many species of corals past their limits of tolerance. "When the temperature of the ocean goes up, it absorbs more carbon dioxide, which creates carbonic acid," said Cairo-based climate change consultant Katherine Jones.

"So not only will the temperature increase, but the PH level will change too," affecting all animals with shells, she said. "We will lose a lot of wildlife, and the ecosystem will be changing in a way that affects us as humans in terms of resources. "The coral reefs are nurseries to baby fish and a feeding ground to bigger fish ... it's an essential part of the ecosystem." Sharm El-Sheikh hosted a United Nations agencies conference in 2018 that called for the protection of coral reefs "before it's too late". Egypt also plans to host the Climate Conference of the Parties (COP27) in November next year.

A report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that up to 90 percent of coral reefs "may be gone by mid-century" even if the rise in temperatures stabilizes below 1.5 degrees Celsius. Jones warned that, as things stand now, climate change and its impacts can no longer be reversed - only slowed - to prevent the worst consequences. "Even if humans completely disappear from Earth tomorrow or we stopped producing any kind of emissions," she said, "the temperature will continue to rise by itself." — AFP