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'Boiling not warming': Marine life suffers as Thai sea temperatures hit record

By Reuters May 23, 2024 | 04:00 pm PT





Boats off the coast of Phuket Island in Thailand in 2023. Photo by Unsplash/Daniela Chintoiu

Aquatic life from coral reefs to fish in the Thailand's eastern gulf coast is suffering as sea surface temperatures hit record highs this month amid a regional heat wave, worrying scientists and local communities.

The once vibrant and colorful corals, about five meters (16 feet) underwater, have turned white in a phenomenon known as coral bleaching, a sign that their health was deteriorating, due to higher water temperatures, scientists say.

Sea surface temperatures in the Eastern Gulf of Thailand reached 32.73 degrees Celsius (90.91 F) earlier this month while underwater readings are slightly warmer, with dive computers showing around 33 C, data shows.

"I couldn't find a single healthy coral," said marine biologist Lalita Putchim of the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources (DMCR) after completing a dive in the gulf coast.



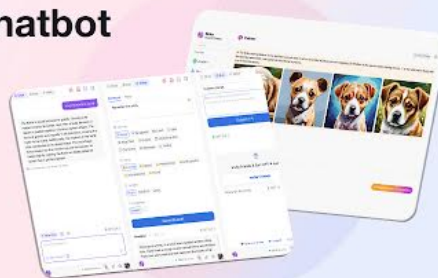


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"Almost all of the species have bleached, there's very little that's not affected."

The Trat archipelago is home to over 66 islands, with over 28.4 square kilometers (2,841 hectares) of coral reef, where Lalita has found that up to 30% of coral life was bleaching and 5% had already died. If water temperatures do not cool, more coral will die, Lalita said.

"It's global boiling, not just global warming," she said.

Rising temperatures were also impacting other marine life and the livelihoods of local fishermen including Sommay Singsura.

In recent years, his daily catch of seafood has been dwindling. Previously he had been able to make up to 10,000 baht (\$275) a day, but now sometimes he comes back empty handed.

"There used to be jackfish, short mackerel, and many others ... But now, the situation isn't good. The weather isn't like what it used to be," Sommay laments.

Coral reefs are both a food resource and habitat for marine life, as well as being natural barriers preventing coastal erosion, scientists say.

If bleaching causes marine life to decrease, fishermen will need to spend more to get their catch, which could see selling prices rise, said Sarawut Siriwong, the dean of faculty of Marine Technology at Burapha University.



"While this (coral bleaching) would affect food security, at the same time, their (community) income stability is also at stake," he said.

Heatstroke kills 30 in Thailand this year as kingdom bakes

Thailand issued fresh warnings about scorching hot weather on Thursday as the government said heatstroke has already killed at least 30 people this year.



Heat wave swells Asia's appetite for air-conditioning

A record-breaking heat wave is broiling parts of Asia, helping drive surging demand for cooling options, including air-conditioning.



Heatstroke kills 61 in Thailand so far this year: govt

Heatstroke has killed 61 people in Thailand so far this year, more than in all of 2023, the health ministry said on Friday after weeks of scorching weather across the region.



Asia's extreme April heat worsened by climate change, scientists say

Extreme temperatures throughout Asia last month were made worse - and more likely - as a result of human-driven climate change, a team of international scientists said on Wednesday.



Climate change could force Thailand to relocate capital Bangkok

Thailand may have to consider relocating its capital Bangkok because of rising sea levels, a senior official in the country's climate change office told AFP.



Thailand closes island after coral bleaching found

An island in southern Thailand was closed on Thursday after the discovery of extensive coral bleaching, the national parks office said.




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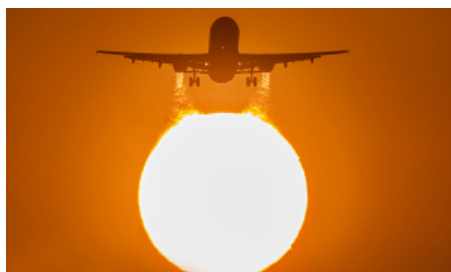


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