

# Offshore mining can damage coral reef: study

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KOLLAM

The proposed offshore mining project off the Kollam coast can cause irreparable damage to marine biodiversity and the livelihoods of local fishers, says a report prepared as part of an ongoing underwater survey by the Marine Monitoring Lab (MML) of the University of Kerala's Department of Aquatic Biology & Fisheries.

The survey has so far documented five hard coral species and an impressive 30 plus soft coral species, suggesting that nearly two-thirds of Kerala's known soft coral diversity thrive in waters off Kollam, where offshore mining in the initial phase. Notably, many of these soft coral species are newly recorded in the region, making it a key biodiversity hotspot for solitary and soft corals within Kerala.

"These rocky reef act as vital hubs within the marine ecosystem. They provide essential habitats, safe breeding areas, and protective shelter for a rich variety of marine life. These reefs are the foundation of intricate food webs, offering feeding grounds and refuge for diverse creatures like fish, crustaceans, corals, sponges, and algae. Furthermore, they serve as nurseries for juvenile fish, playing a key role in maintaining healthy fish populations and ensuring ecological balance. The coral communities on these reef significantly boost marine productivity, creating abundant food sources and shelter for countless marine species. In essence, these reef are indispensable for a thriving and balanced marine environment," says A. Bijukumar, Professor and Head of the Department, Department of Aquatic Biology and Fisheries, University of Kerala.

**Scope for ecotourism**  
While corals are an endangered marine species protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, these rocky reef areas hold substantial promise for ecotourism development.

The study points out that the pristine coral and snorkelling could attract visitors, generating valuable economic opportunities for local communities.

"Moreover, these rocky reef provide natural coastal defence, shielding shorelines from erosion and mitigating the impact of post-monsoon storms," adds Dr. Bijukumar.

The proposed mining operations, planned for depths of 40 to 60 m off the Kollam coast, pose a direct and significant threat to the region's vital rocky reef habitats.

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