

Soft coral



Photo: Gordon La Proh



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There are about 600 types of corals found in the Great Barrier Reef. Keppel Bay is home to both hard corals and soft corals or Alcyonacea (an order of corals that do not produce calcium carbonate skeletons).

The distribution of corals in Keppel Bay varies e.g. Bald Rock contained about 60% hard corals, less than 15% soft corals and the balance comprised of algae and other elements, while Conical Rocks had a low hard coral cover with over 65% soft corals coverage (percentages based on a 2007 study).

Keppel Bay has families of soft corals including carnation, tree and celt corals. Their form can vary from spiky edges like thorns on a rose bush to rounded cauliflower-like shapes, to a wild mixture of shapes. Some are visually characterised by vibrant colours with iridescent boldness, compared to more placid pastel tones on others. Some large soft coral colonies, such as *Sinularia*, are thought to be hundreds of years old. Others are fast growers with a short life expectancy.



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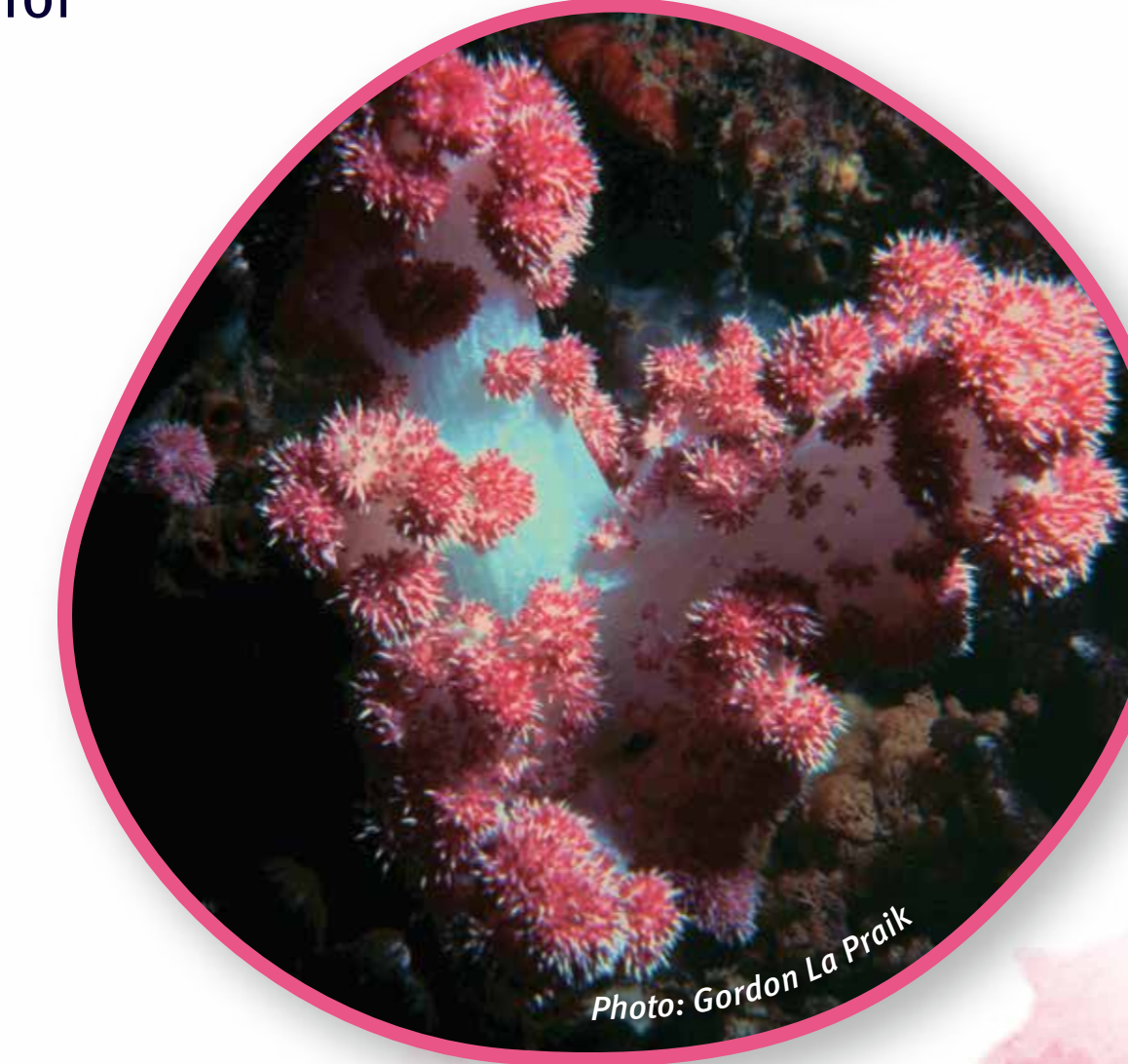


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Learn more about soft corals of the Keppel Islands

Important food sources are small suspended plankton particles. The plankton are carried on water currents to the tentacles of the coral polyps. Most of the nutrients vital for healthy soft corals, come from zooxanthellae. Like land plants, zooxanthellae use the sun to make food for themselves and corals. In turn, soft corals are food for fish, crustaceans and snails. Soft corals fight back by producing chemicals in their tissues that make them distasteful and even poisonous to those predators.

