

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Legislation Committee
Answers to questions on notice
Environment portfolio

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Hearing: Additional Estimates
Outcome: 1
Programme: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority
Topic: Coral bleaching
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Question Type: Spoken

Senator Singh asked:

Senator SINGH: Dr Reichelt, you mentioned in your opening statement climate change being obviously a threat, with coral bleaching predicted to become more frequent and severe as the climate changes. Is 2002 still the largest assault that has occurred on our Great Barrier Reef in relation to coral bleaching?

Dr Reichelt: To my knowledge, I think 1998 was probably the largest single one—2002, 2004 and 2006 all saw events; 2002 was certainly significant.

Senator SINGH: Your website says that 2002 was the largest coral-bleaching event on record.

Dr Reichelt: I would have to check what exactly—are we referring to the corals that died or the amount that bleached? It could well be. To put some figures around it, in both those events something like 50 per cent of the corals of the reef did bleach. Not all of them died. Only five per cent of them died.

Answer:

There have been a number of mass bleaching events in the Great Barrier Reef, with the most severe occurring in the summers of 1997–1998 and 2001–2002:

- In 1998, about 42 per cent of the Reef experienced some bleaching.
- In 2002, about 54 per cent of the Reef experienced some bleaching.

Scientists assessing the events said these statistics, and the fact that nearly twice as many offshore reefs bleached in 2002 compared to 1998, makes the 2002 event the worst bleaching event on record for the Great Barrier Reef.

Fortunately, only five per cent of reefs suffered significant coral mortality in each of these events, as sea temperatures came back down again in time for recovery to occur.

The Government continues to invest heavily in measures that will improve the health and resilience of the Great Barrier Reef.