

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

Question No: 333

Hearing: Additional Estimates

Outcome: Agency

Program: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Topic: Past bleaching events and recovery

Hansard Page:

Question Date: 6 March 2017

Question Type: Written

Senator Roberts asked:

In past GBR bleaching events, the bleached areas have quickly recovered. Is there anything in the latest northern bleaching that sets this event apart as unusual and that may indicate it won't recover?

Answer:

Following past mass coral bleaching events on the Great Barrier Reef, follow up surveys generally showed that, in the majority of cases, the reefs recovered well. However, in each case a small percentage of reefs did suffer high coral mortality as a result of the bleaching.

The 2016 bleaching event was the most widespread and severe mass bleaching event ever recorded on the Great Barrier Reef. Surveys have indicated that an estimated 22 per cent of the coral on the Great Barrier Reef died as a result. The full impact from the event is still currently unfolding. Currently (as of April 2017), mass coral bleaching is occurring on the Great Barrier Reef for the second consecutive year and bleaching is widespread.

Factors including higher-than-average sustained sea surface temperatures and a warmer-than-average winter during 2016 mean that those corals that did avoid / recover from last year's bleaching are likely to have remained under relatively high levels of stress coming up the start of summer 2016-2017. This makes them more susceptible to coral bleaching and coral disease, and less resilient to any further stressors.

The 2016-2017 bleaching event on the Great Barrier Reef is part of the third global mass coral bleaching event, which has been affecting the world's coral reefs for the past two years.