

Reef sites

Precious coral and rock sponge gardens on the deep aphotic fore-reef of Osprey Reef (Coral Sea, Australia)

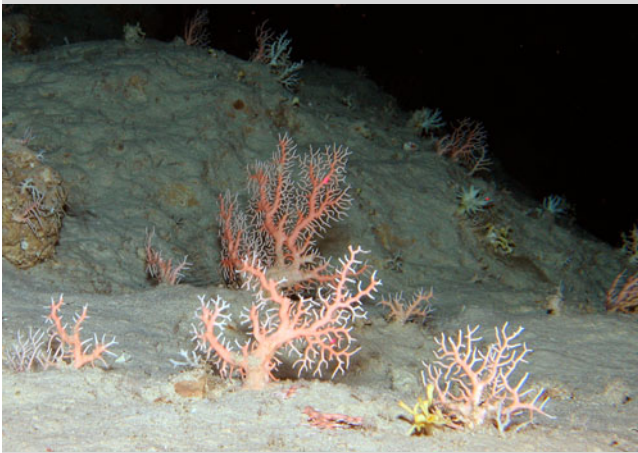


Fig. 1 Garden of precious corals (*Corallium* sp.) at North Horn (Osprey Reef, 265 m depth). Size of colonies about 30 cm (centre foreground). Photo: Marum



Fig. 2 Garden of rock sponges ('Lithistida', the dirty round 'balls'), red ophiuroids, a crinoid and cold-water corals (*Madrepora* sp., left and right side of image) at North Horn (Osprey Reef, 375 m depth). Photo: Marum

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In December 2009, the Deep Down Under Expedition (www.deepdownunder.de) explored the deep fore-reef slopes of the Queensland Plateau's western reefs in the Coral Sea to a depth of 850 m. Due to its rich biodiversity and heritage value, the Coral Sea was declared a Conservation Zone (Coral Sea Conservation Zone, CSCZ) by the Australian Government in May 2009. However, while the uniqueness and importance of Coral Sea shallow-water reefs have been recognized, knowledge of sub-photic benthic communities is deficient (see also Bongaerts et al. 2011). An inspection-class remotely operated vehicle (ROV 'Cherokee', Marum, Bremen) was deployed at Osprey (13°50S 146°32E) and Bougainville (15°29S 147°05E) Reefs to explore deep aphotic benthic communities. For the first time in tropical eastern Australia, gardens of precious corals (*Corallium* sp.; Fig. 1) as well as rock sponges ('Lithistida') and cold-water corals (*Madrepora* sp.) (Fig. 2) were discovered on the walls of Osprey Reef near North Horn, in depths of 265 and 375 m, respectively. Several new species of glass sponges that have reef-building potential were also recently described from deep Osprey Reef (Dohrmann et al. 2011). The discovery of these previously unknown and unique communities on the deep Coral Sea fore-reefs underpins the importance of the CSCZ as an exceptional biodiversity resource that warrants continued protection, scientific exploration and documentation.

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