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Coral reefs threatened with extinction

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Coral reef species are facing an escalating danger of extinction as a result of rising temperatures. Up to one-third of the small animals could be wiped out in the coming years due to warmer ocean waters, increasing acidity in the sea, and the compounding impacts of fishing and pollution, scientists predict.

To help save 83 imperiled coral species in U.S. waters, the Center for Biological Diversity has petitioned the National Marine Fisheries Service to protect them under the federal Endangered Species Act.

"Coral reefs are the world's most endangered ecosystems and provide an early warning of impacts to come from our thirst for fossil fuels," Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director for the organization, said in a statement announcing the petition. "Within a few decades, global warming and ocean acidification threaten to completely unravel magnificent coral reefs that took millions of years to build."

Up to one-fifth of the world's coral reefs already have been lost and the threatened species in U.S. waters could be gone by midcentury if steps are not taken, the petition said. Warmer waters have led to fatal bleaching of coral reefs, while ocean acidification, which occurs from the sea's absorption of carbon dioxide, prevents reefs from developing protective skeletons.

Elkhorn and staghorn corals in Florida became the first coral species to be listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 2006. Expanding the ESA listings could mean further controls on fishing, dumping, dredging and offshore oil development that could threaten reefs.

-- Kim Murphy

Photo: A squat lobster tiptoes through a coral reef off the U.S. Atlantic Coast. Credit: rthowardphotography.com