

Saving Nemo?

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Scientists are working to protect the clown fish, which face threats to their habitat -- coral reefs -- due to global warming.

In the movie "Finding Nemo," the orange clown fish was saved. Now environmentalists say the species needs saving in real life, too.

On Sept. 13, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a petition that it hopes will prevent clown fish and seven other coral reef-dwelling species from becoming endangered.

There is no evidence that clown fish numbers are dropping. So why are scientists concerned? Shaye Wolf is an animal scientist for the Center for Biological Diversity. She said the coral reefs, where clown fish live, are becoming unhealthy. "We're asking for protection of the clown fish because it's in trouble from climate change," Wolf said.

Clown fish protect themselves from predators by living in sea anemones that grow on coral reefs. Scientists have warned that coral reefs are likely to become the world's first ecosystem to disappear because of global warming. The reefs are at risk from rising levels of acid in the ocean, which comes from pollution from humans. The pollution damages a clown fish's sense of hearing, sight and smell. With damaged senses, young clown fish have trouble finding coral reefs to make their homes. Sometimes the fish can become so confused that they are drawn to predators' smells by mistake. "The longer we wait, the harder it's going to be to save these unique creatures," Wolf said.

Clown fish face other threats. They are among the world's most commonly traded fish species. Wolf says protecting the fish -- and the coral reefs where they live -- under the Endangered Species Act will help.

"We need to protect Nemo and all the other fishes that we care about," Wolf said. "As the reefs go, so do the fish that depend on them."

The National Marine Fisheries Service will decide this December whether these fish will be protected under the Endangered Species Act. Until then, as Dory from Finding Nemo says, "just keep swimming."

