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Is Nemo Ready for His Climate Close-Up?



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The climate crisis isn't just about searing heat, super storms and polar bears. Sea life is getting hammered too.

Take those tiny orange clownfish, inspiration for Finding Nemo. Greenhouse gas pollution is not only destroying their coral reef habitats and hurting the anemone they rely on for protection, but it also damages their smell and hearing -- so much that it will make the little fish more vulnerable to predators and more prone to getting lost.

On Monday, the National Marine Fisheries Service took an important step toward protecting these colorful fish under the Endangered Species Act. It isn't a done deal yet, but the agency says the fish may warrant federal protection.

The announcement comes on the heels of a landmark federal decision last week to protect 20 species of corals threatened by global warming and ocean acidification.

Help can't come soon enough. Left unchecked the climate crisis will wreak havoc on our oceans and the sea life that depend on them.

Every day the world's oceans absorb 22 million tons of carbon dioxide from factories, cars, power plants and other human sources. The result: Seawater becomes more acidic, spelling serious trouble for many marine animals, from plankton and coral and up the food chain to sea stars, salmon, sea otters, whales -- and even people who rely on oceans for food.

While the dangers have been known for years, sea creatures are only just now starting to get legal protections from the climate crisis.

The 20 corals protected under the Endangered Species Act -- 15 in the Pacific and five in waters off Florida and the Caribbean -- are being hit hard by global warming as more acidic water robs them of their ability to grow and thrive.

By the middle of this century, more than 97 percent of reefs will likely experience extreme thermal stress -- which can cause bleaching and even death -- because of global warming. Disease and acidification are compounding their plight.

Endangered Species Act protection will give these corals habitat protections as well as restrictions on federal approvals on actions that could hurt them, including water and air pollution, dredging, coastal construction and certain kinds of commercial fishing. It also gives the government new tools to help reduce greenhouse gas pollution from federal projects. These steps will give corals a better shot at surviving and coping with the growing stress from the climate crisis.

Orange clownfish, if they get federal protections, would get their own safeguards.

Ultimately the best way to save these corals and fish -- as well as sea life around the globe -- is to make drastic cuts in greenhouse gas pollution. It's not too late to save our oceans but we have to act fast and on the scale that matches the magnitude of the challenge we face.

Failing to act, though, will leave future generations with seas that are empty of the kind of rich biodiversity there once was in our oceans. And fish like Nemo, pushed into extinction by a world indifferent to its survival, will be relegated only to the movies.