Gift to the Earth

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Norwegian coldwater coral protection

Setting an international example in marine conservation

SUMMARY

Coral reefs are one of the oldest types of living systems on Earth and are critically important for a number of species and for fisheries and biodiversity of the oceans. Norwegian waters support little-explored cold water *Lophelia* coral reefs of international importance. Norway's reefs have been under pressure for decades from a variety of threats, including bottom-trawling, mineral extraction, and oil and gas exploration.

To save these reefs for the future, Norwegian authorities have imposed a series of protective measures. All deliberate destruction of coral reefs is prohibited through the 1999 Coral Protection Regulation. More recently, Norway has taken specific action to protect several reefs, including the world's largest known cold water reef, from harmful bottom-trawling. Furthermore, a national 'Marine Conservation Plan' is under development to ensure improved protection of the corals and other valuable marine habitats. In addition to the national action taken to protect corals, Norway also promotes improved coral protection beyond Norwegian waters in relevant international fora, like the OSPAR Convention.

It is estimated that between 30 and 50 percent of the Norwegian *Lophelia* reefs were already damaged before the protective measures were taken. Elsewhere in the North-East Atlantic, the destruction of cold water reefs continues without protective measures. WWF is working to promote the conservation of cold water coral reefs in the North-East Atlantic, but to date, Norway is the only country that has turned nice words into concrete conservation actions.

White *Lophelia* reef and red sea fan (*Paragorgia*) – © Erling Svensen

Cold water coral reefs shelter an impressive range of biodiversity, such as the Amphipod – © Erling Svensen

Norway's actions constitute an international pilot example of cold water coral conservation. WWF recognizes this as a *Gift to the Earth* – a globally significant conservation action which demonstrates environmentally responsible leadership and is an inspiration to others.

BACKGROUND

The existence of coral species in North Atlantic waters has been known by fishermen and scientists for decades. Still, most of Norway's coral reefs have only been discovered in the past ten years, and it is only recently that we have come to learn how important they are.

Cold water coral reefs are among the richest habitats in Europe. *Lophelia* reefs are biodiversity «hot-spots» on the sea floor. More than 750 species have been found on the reefs in the North-East Atlantic. The exact function of the reefs in the marine ecosystem is still largely uninvestigated. But it has been proven that fish concentrations are higher within the reef areas than outside, suggesting that the reef are important habitats for commercially important fish species, including redfish, ling and tusk.

Lophelia reefs grow at a rate of about 1 millimetre in height per year. This means that some of the biggest known reefs are more than 8500 years old – they started growing just after the last ice age. By contrast, these reefs can be permanently damaged in a few seconds by bottom-trawling.

There is widespread concern for the future of the coral reefs in the North-East Atlantic. In a recent report to the European Commission, scientists from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) warned that the only way to protect Europe's cold-water coral reefs is to accurately map them and then close them to fishing trawlers. ICES secretary general David Griffith stated: «*Towing a heavy trawl net through a cold-water coral reef is a bit like driving a bulldozer through a nature reserve*».

While a lot of mapping still remains to locate all of the reefs in Norway's waters, Norwegian authorities have taken pioneering steps by closing some known coral areas to bottom-trawling. WWF urges other European nations to follow Norway's example and commit to establish an ecologically coherent network of Marine Protected Areas in the North-East Atlantic covering at least 60% of the known cold water coral reef habitat.

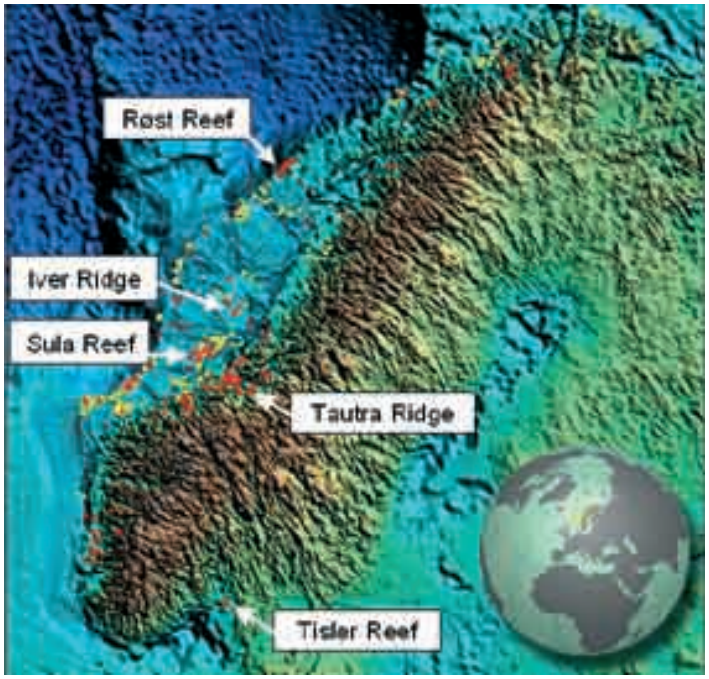
THE CONSERVATION BENEFITS

By establishing no-trawling areas around coral reefs, Norway has protected reefs of international heritage value against their most imminent threat. Protecting the reefs has benefits beyond the reef biodiversity – it is believed that these no-trawl zones will help provide replenishment areas for important commercial fish stocks. Norwegian fishermen have been supportive of the coral protection, recognizing the importance of the coral reefs for their own livelihoods.

To date, Norway has protected these important cold water coral reefs through the 1999 Coral Protection Regulation and the Nature Conservation Act:

- the Røst reef (the world's largest known *Lophelia* reef – 45 km long by 3 kms wide), protected in 2003;
- the Sula Reef, a 12 km long reef along the central Norwegian coast;
- the Iver Ridge, the reef most damaged by trawling;
- the Tautra ridge, the world's shallowest growing *Lophelia* reef at 40 meters depth.

WWF expects to see the Tisler reef (only known occurrence of yellow *Lophelia* corals) protected in the near future.



Coral reefs concentrate along the continental break and on ridges on the continental shelf, on morainic hills and similar topographical features. Red and yellow dots represents the distribution of *Lophelia pertusa* in Norway – © IMR

Fragments and larger pieces of dead *Lophelia pertusa* from a trawling ground on the Norwegian continental shelf. Trawling is the major threat for this fragile ecosystem – © IMR

RELEVANCE TO THE TARGETS OF WWF'S ENDANGERED SEAS PROGRAMME

WWF's Endangered Seas Programme has two targets: Sustainable fisheries and the establishment of Marine Protected Areas. Norway's *Gift to the Earth* contributes to both these targets by:

- Setting an international example in cold water coral protection.
- Increasing the coverage of protected marine areas.
- Establishing zones with no damaging fisheries activity, with support from the fisheries industry.

The Norwegian coral reefs are located within two of WWF highest priority marine ecoregions, the North-East Atlantic Shelf and the Barents Sea, and the gift contributes to WWF's goals of biodiversity conservation within these ecoregions.

FUTURE MARINE GIFTS TO THE EARTH

Gifts to the Earth provide international recognition and support for significant conservation actions such as the protection of the Røst Reef in Norway. Future marine Gifts are planned in Australia, Mozambique, South Africa, and the South Pacific Islands.

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WWF North-East Atlantic Programme: www.wwfneap.org

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The **GIFT TO THE EARTH** is WWF's highest recognition for a globally significant conservation achievement, which addresses WWF's conservation priorities by:

- Advancing conservation of biodiversity, especially forest, freshwater and marine ecosystems, or enhancing the prospects for survival of threatened species
- Addressing global threats posed by climate change, toxic chemicals and unsustainable use of resources such as timber, freshwater and fisheries.

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