
The SEA

Talk About It

If you could explore under the sea, where would you like to go? What would you want to see?

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Coral Reefs

by Mindy Smith

Vocabulary

coral
reef
partnership
current
eventually
brittle
suburbs

Context Clues

Descriptions in the surrounding text can give clues to the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

Use context clues to find the meaning of *suburbs*.

Coral comes in a variety of shapes, colors, and sizes. It can be the size of the head of a pin or a foot in diameter. Although corals are often mistaken for rocks or plants, they are actually very small animals. When thousands of these animals are grouped together to form a mound or a tree shape, it is called a coral colony. Thousands of these colonies make up a **reef**.

There are more than 700 kinds of coral but only two main types. Each kind of coral is either a soft coral or a hard coral.

The easiest way to identify a hard coral is by its appearance. A colony of hard corals can resemble a vase, a plate, a little tree, a boulder, a brain, or the antlers of an elk. Hard corals have groups of six, smooth tentacles around their mouths. They get their name from the hard cup-like skeletons of limestone that they produce out of seawater.

Soft corals always have eight feathery tentacles around their mouths. They have names like sea fan, sea whip, or sea fingers and are as soft and bendable as plants or tree branches. Soft corals do not have hard skeletons. They have woody cores that support them instead. Soft corals often live on coral reefs along with hard corals, but soft corals can also live in cool, dark regions where hard corals would die.

Hard corals cannot live as far from the surface as soft corals because hard corals have plants, called algae, living inside of them. Through this **partnership**, the algae provide most of the coral polyp's food and the polyp gives the algae protection from the predators that eat them. The algae, though, require sunlight in order to live.

Hard corals begin their lives as fertilized eggs. These develop into soft larvae which drift with the **current** of the waves until they attach themselves to a part of the existing reef. **Eventually** the coral polyps die and other living larvae attach themselves to their skeletons.

Scientists believe that the existing coral reefs began to grow over 50 million years ago. When seaweed, sponges, giant clams, oysters, starfish, and **brittle** stars die, they serve as the foundations upon which another generation of hard coral polyps will attach and grow. In this way, the hard corals are the architects of the community—from the downtown area out to the **suburbs**.

The sprawling structures of the coral reefs support a quarter of all known sea animals. This includes over 4,000 different kinds of fish, along with mollusks, octopus and squid, sponges, algae, seaweed, shrimp, sea turtles, and sharks.

Reread for Comprehension

Analyze Text Structure

Compare and Contrast Authors sometimes organize a selection by comparing and contrasting two or more things. Comparing is telling how things or people are alike. Contrasting is telling how they are different.

A Venn Diagram can help you analyze text structure. Reread the selection and diagram how soft and hard corals are alike and different.