

The Gulf of Aqaba's Reefs of Hope



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The Gulf of Aqaba region has hosted human enterprise, culture, and the exchange of innovative ideas and perspectives for millennia. At 180 km long and 14 km wide, the Gulf is a substantial body of water bordering four countries: Jordan, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The highly biodiverse coral reefs of this northern Red Sea site exhibit a unique resilience to global warming, which may hold the key to preserving the Earth's corals as ocean temperatures continue to warm. In addition, the Gulf contains multiple interdependent ecosystems, including mangrove forests, seagrass meadows, tropical (supratidal) saltmarshes, shallow lagoons, and reef flats, which harbor numerous threatened and endangered species. Due to ongoing conservation efforts by its four bordering countries, the Gulf of Aqaba's ecosystems remain relatively undamaged for the moment.

However, the future of this region is under threat from both a changing climate and other human-induced environmental damage, resulting in a growing need to protect these unparalleled landward and marine areas. Coastal development in the region has been gathering momentum in recent years. More residents and greater tourist activity could intensify pollution and over-fishing, and could otherwise harm ecosystems and negatively impact the communities that rely on coral reefs for their survival.

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Coral reefs and marine life are not beholden to political borders, and urgent conservation efforts are needed—on both regional and national levels—to secure the Gulf's unique, temperature-resistant coral reefs and their interdependent ecosystems. To successfully implement necessary protective measures, strong political leadership and transborder cooperation and coordination are vital. A clear, focused, region-wide strategy will be required to engage local and national governments, local communities, and various critical stakeholders, as well as to obtain the requisite funding and resources. The success of this effort will require the proper balance of direction

setting, mobilization, and intervention, including the development of a plan that will monitor the impacts of tourism on the region's ecosystem and communities.

Effective "coral reef diplomacy" and international coordination could focus existing but insufficient local management plans that aim to secure the future of the Gulf of Aqaba's unique reefs, ensure the sustainable development of coastal areas, and protect the livelihoods of millions of people—preserving this ancient and complex region's irreplaceable history and resources for countless future generations.