

About the Long-Term Monitoring Program and the annual report

For 40 years the Australian Institute of Marine Science has surveyed the condition of numerous reefs across the Great Barrier Reef (the Reef). This program, called the [Long-Term Monitoring Program \(LTMP\)](#), is an essential resource for scientists, governments and agencies involved in the management and protection of the Reef.

Researchers use hard coral cover as one indicator of reef condition. The LTMP also estimates levels of coral bleaching, and numbers of crown-of-thorns starfish, coral trout and sharks. Each year hard coral cover results are published as a summary, providing an overview on the status, condition and trend of reefs across the Northern, Central, and Southern regions of the Reef. More detailed coral, fish and habitat data are collected, analysed and published by the program in peer-reviewed publications and on our [Reef Monitoring Dashboard](#).

The [2025-2026 annual summary report is now available](#). For this report, the upper reef slope around the perimeter of 121 reefs (primarily on the mid to outer shelf) were surveyed between August 2025 and June 2026.

Overall findings in 2025-2026

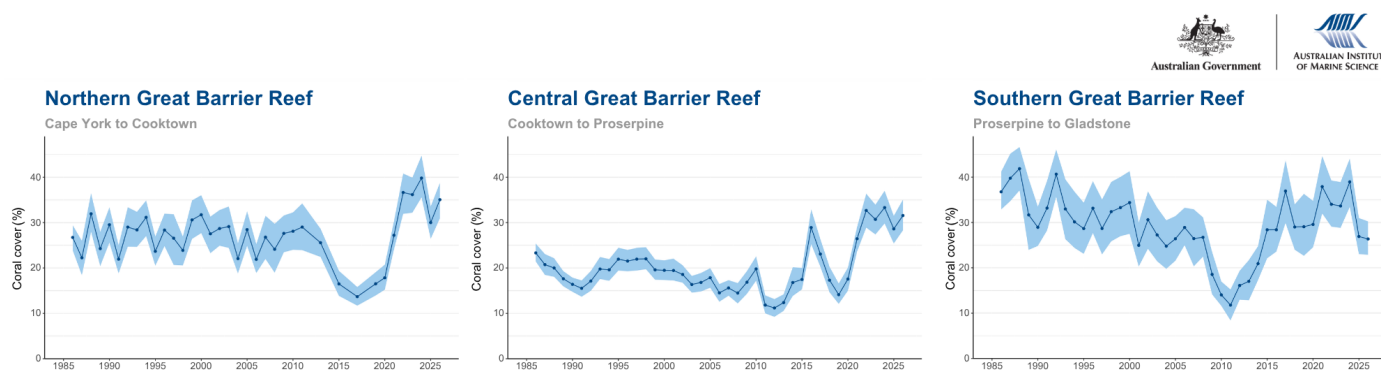
Monsoon relief supports initial recovery from recent coral bleaching

Regional average hard coral cover has increased slightly or remained similar to levels in 2025, where steep declines from high levels in recent years were recorded.

Coral cover in the Northern and Central regions increased and is above long-term averages, signalling the start of recovery from recent widespread coral loss. Coral cover in the Southern region is relatively stable but down slightly from last year, and is below its long-term average.

Coral cover remained unchanged on most reefs (56% of reefs), more than a quarter saw increased cover (28%), and declines (16%) were less common.

A late summer monsoon cooled the ocean and reduced heat stress on coral, likely limiting the severity of bleaching during summer 2025–26.

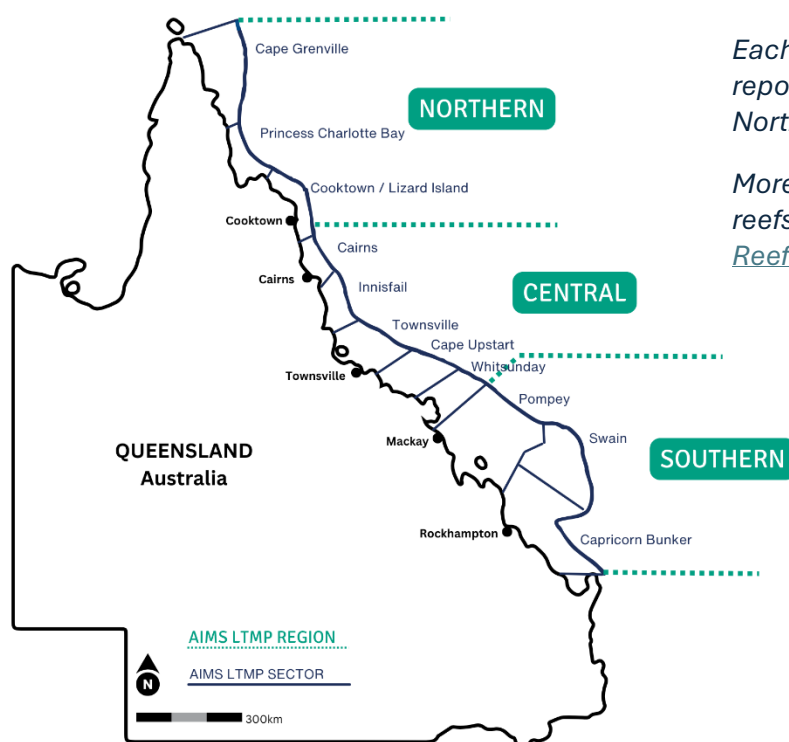


Regional trends in the percentage of hard coral cover on the Northern, Central and Southern Great Barrier Reef from manta tow surveys by the AIMS Long-Term Monitoring Program up to the 2025/26 survey year. Data are modelled averages (dark blue points) with associated 95% credible intervals (light blue shading).

Percentages of hard coral cover remained variable across individual reefs.

- 3 reefs had >0%-10% coral cover
- 64 reefs had >10%-30% coral cover
- 42 reefs had >30%-50% coral cover
- 12 reefs had >50%-75% coral cover
- No reefs had more than 75% coral cover.

AIMS Long-Term Monitoring Program regions and sectors



Each year, the Long-Term Monitoring Program reports on trends in hard coral cover across the Northern, Central and Southern regions (this report).

More comprehensive data and reports for individual reefs and sectors are regularly published via [AIMS' Reef Monitoring Dashboard](#).

Northern Great Barrier Reef – from Cape York to Cooktown

- 37 reefs were surveyed
- Average hard coral cover was **35.1%**, an increase from 30.0% in 2025.
- It remains above the long-term average for the region (which is 27.0%)

The steep decline in coral cover recorded last year halted this year, with most reefs remaining stable or increasing, indicating initial recovery from the 2024 mass bleaching event. Only one reef had recorded a decline in coral cover, despite the region being affected by a mass bleaching event in early 2025. However, the 2025 event likely limited the extent of recovery that may otherwise have occurred.

Crown-of-thorns starfish numbers in the northern region remain elevated, Increases over the last few years indicate initiation of the fifth recorded wave of outbreaks for the Reef since the 1960s.

Some damage from Severe Tropical Cyclone Narelle (2026) was recorded, but most surveys in the region were completed before the category 5 cyclone tracked across the Reef. Narelle's impacts will be assessed over the next survey season.

Central Great Barrier Reef – from Cooktown to Proserpine

- 39 reefs were surveyed
- Average hard coral cover was **31.6%**, an increase from 28.6% in 2025.
- The central region remains above the long-term average (of 20.0%).

Coral cover in the central region was variable, and most reefs remain unchanged. Damage from Tropical Cyclone Koji was recorded on two reefs, and its impact will be assessed over the next season.

Low levels of crown-of-thorns starfish remain in this region, with one reef recording an Established Outbreak.

Southern Great Barrier Reef – from Proserpine to Gladstone

- 45 reefs were surveyed
- Average hard coral cover is **26.4%**, relatively stable but a slight decline from 26.9% in 2025.
- Coral cover remains slightly below the long-term average (of 29.3%).

Coral loss slowed in the Southern region this year after the LTMP recorded the program's largest annual coral loss there in 2025, mainly due to intense heat stress during the 2024 mass bleaching event. Most reefs were unchanged or increased, although nine reefs, mostly in the southernmost Capricorn-Bunker sector, declined following coral disease and storm damage from Severe Tropical Cyclone Alfred in 2025.

Crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks have declined but remain in low numbers. Crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks have been impacting the region for several years.

What do our findings mean for the Great Barrier Reef?

Our findings show many reefs retain the capacity to begin recovery after major coral loss, when given the opportunity.

Unlike the impact of the 2024 mass bleaching event, the 2025 mass bleaching event resulted in limited coral loss. This likely reflects its lower intensity and shorter duration, highlighting that bleaching events do not always have the same consequences. However, the 2025 heat stress still had an impact and likely limited the initial recovery recorded this year.

The Northern and Central regions accumulated heat stress this summer, and regional coral bleaching was declared by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. However, the late monsoon cooled conditions which helped limit coral bleaching.

This year's change in overall trends from last year's steep declines do not nullify the longer-term, emerging trend of volatility on the Reef; coral cover now swings between very low and very high levels, a shift from the more stable patterns observed during the early years of this monitoring program.

The Great Barrier Reef is in a comparatively better condition than many reef systems worldwide, which have been heavily impacted by the 4th global bleaching event and other pressures. However, the

increased frequency and extent of bleaching events in the last decade are unprecedented. Climate change remains the greatest threat to the Reef, and along with other pressures from more localised sources.

Background – coral cover on the Great Barrier Reef in recent years.

Forty years of continuous data collection on the Great Barrier Reef by the LTMP shows that regional coral cover on the Great Barrier Reef fluctuates in response to disturbances. The most dramatic changes have occurred over the past 15 years, where levels reached both historical lows, historic highs and last year, a historic annual rate of decline in the southern region.

Since 2018, hard coral cover increased in both the Northern and Central regions after almost a decade of disturbances including cyclones, predatory crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks, and back-to-back mass bleaching events in 2016 and 2017; all of which caused widespread mortality. Towards the end of 2023, hard coral cover in the Northern and Central regions reached the highest levels since monitoring began,

The Southern region has generally had higher coral cover than the Northern or Central regions, but it has also experienced larger fluctuations. A rapid and substantial increase in hard coral cover occurred from an historic low in 2011 to 2017; however, ongoing outbreaks of crown-of-thorns starfish continued to stymie rises in coral cover in this region.

Recovery in the three regions had been primarily, but not exclusively, driven by fast-growing but vulnerable corals. It continued despite mass bleaching events in 2020 and 2022. These were less intense than the 2016 and 2017 events, showing that mass coral bleaching events do not always lead to widespread mortality.

Over the [2024 Australian summer, widespread, record heat stress caused the fifth mass bleaching event](#) since 2016. This event, together with wave damage and associated flooding from two severe tropical cyclones and ongoing crown-of-thorns outbreaks, caused these high levels to decline sharply.

Another [mass bleaching event occurred on the Great Barrier Reef during the summer of 2025](#). This event was less extensive than the 2024 event. This year's results show minimal (but not zero) impact from this event, once again highlighting that not all bleaching events have the same consequences.

Further information

- Learn more about the [AIMS Long-Term Monitoring Program](#) - what we survey and how we do it.
- [Individual reef survey data](#) and [sector reports](#) are updated after each survey trip, via the AIMS Reef Dashboard.
- Visit our [Reef Report Hub](#) for more information on our monitoring of the Great Barrier Reef

Stay up-to-date

Subscribe to the [Long-Term Monitoring Program's 'Back from the Reef' regular email updates](#).

Media

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