



EXPLORE Marine Biology

Illustrated Marine Biology Tutorials

Types of Coral Reefs

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In this lesson, we're going to look at the different types of coral reefs.

The first one we will take a look at is **fringing reefs**. The fringing reefs grow near the coastline around small islands and continental land masses, wherever there is a hard surface.

They are separated from the shore by a narrow shallow lagoon and fringing reefs are the most common type of reef which you will encounter. In fact, the fringing reefs are so common that these are the ones that are most affected by human activities.

Another type of coral reef formation is the **barrier reef**. The barrier reef can be found parallel to the coastline, but unlike the fringing reefs, it is separated from the land by a deeper and wider lagoon.

Sometimes at the shallowest point, the barrier reefs can reach the surface of the water, forming a barrier to navigation so that boats aren't able to pass through it.

The world's largest barrier reef is the Great Barrier Reef of Australia, which runs about 21 kilometers along the northeast coast of Australia to New Guinea.

The third type of coral reef is **atolls**. Atolls are usually elliptical in shape and is usually found on top of volcanic islands. Atolls have a centrally located lagoon, and they can vary in size from one kilometer in diameter to over 130 kilometers long.

There are more than 300 atolls found in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The water in the lagoon of an atoll is connected to the open sea by gaps found in the coral reef.

There are also **patch reefs**. These can occur within the lagoons of the atolls and the barrier reefs. Where you find patch reefs, they are usually numerous in number however they don't usually grow so tall as to peak above the surface of the water.

