

What is a Coral Reef?

Hi. I'm Sergeant Major, a **tropical** fish that lives on the **reef**. See my badge? It says "**Reef Protector**." The **Coral Reef** is where I live with my family and many other plants and animals. This is our home. This is where we sleep and eat.

It took a long time to build our home. Our **Coral Reef** first began with a teeny-weeny single planula **larva** that set out to find a solid place to grow with the right conditions; warm water, low **nutrients**, bright light, and stable high **salinity** – that means salt water. It developed into a **polyp** and built a covering of limestone around itself. Other **polyps** grew from its sides. These little **polyps** grew other little **polyps** and they continued growing like this until a huge **reef** was formed. That's my neighborhood. Can you believe it took hundreds of years for this **coral reef** to grow? In fact **coral reefs** only grow one to sixteen feet every 1,000 years.

Each **coral reef** is special and different. Some even look like enormous fans, boulders or staghorns. They are actually considered living animals. These living **corals** belong to the same family as jelly fish, anemones, sea fans and Portuguese man-of-war. **Corals** are animals and enjoy a **symbiotic** or very close relationships with plants called **zooxanthellae**.

Now don't go looking for **coral reefs** in just any water. You can only find them in **tropical** or **subtropical** waters such as the Florida Keys or Biscayne Bay.