

# Save Our Coral Reefs!

Have you ever seen pictures of a coral reef? If so, you know that a reef is a rich environment where plants and animals live. This kind of environment is an example of an **ecosystem**. When coral reefs are healthy, vegetation grows thickly there. Many colorful fish swim in and around the plants. All this life makes a coral reef a **lush** setting—but only when the reef is healthy.

Coral reefs are made from tiny animals called *polyps*. Coral polyps are like tiny jellyfish. When the polyps become **mature**, or grown-up, they attach themselves to a hard surface like a reef. The polyps then build tiny shells for themselves. A large reef contains an **abundance** of shells—many millions of them. Coral reefs come in many colors and form fascinating shapes. Some parts of a coral reef look like human brains, while others resemble deer antlers or fans.

A coral reef is a very fragile environment. Many things can affect the reef and the **organisms** that make the reef their home. For instance, if anyone dumps chemicals into the water near a coral reef, or if other pollutants appear, a series of changes may take place. Many plants and animals that once **flourished** there would not be able to get the **nutrients** they need to stay healthy. Then a coral reef is not such a beautiful place to visit.

Pollution changes the water, and sometimes the polyps die. Sometimes the algae—tiny plants that live on the coral—die, too. Then the little animals that eat the algae disappear. So do the bigger animals that eat the smaller animals. Next, the coral changes color. Instead of being bright red, gold, or blue, it becomes almost white. Scientists think that the world has lost as much as one-third of its coral reefs from the effects of pollution and other human actions.

There are many different kinds of coral polyps. Scientists have collected **specimens** to study how different chemicals and changes in water temperature affect the polyps. The scientists hope that they can learn exactly what harms the polyps and the other animals and plants that live in the reefs. Perhaps, when we know what creates these problems, we can find solutions. Then the world will have beautiful, healthy coral reefs that are once again **teeming** with all kinds of life.

**COMPREHENSION** What is one reason that animals in coral reefs might die? How does a coral reef grow?







# The Highest Peak



Rachel wiped the sweat off her forehead. Her father, Chris, looked at her worriedly. They had been hiking since eight o'clock that morning. Now it was late afternoon, and Chris could see that Rachel was tired.

Rachel and Chris were climbing Mount Whitney, part of the **sprawling** Sierra Nevada mountain **range**. The **vast** chain of mountains that made up the Sierra Nevada stretched out across four hundred miles of land!

Rachel and Chris both loved being outdoors. Together, they had climbed many **lofty** mountains that reached toward the sky. But Mount Whitney was special. The peak of this towering mountain was the highest point in the United States. For Rachel and Chris, the excitement of standing at the top of Mount Whitney would be stronger than any thrill they had felt before. They just had to climb a little farther.

"Do you mind if we stop for a minute?" asked Rachel.

"Of course I don't," said Chris. The two hikers paused on the path and pulled their water bottles out of their backpacks. They drank deeply from the cool, refreshing water. While they drank, they rested their eyes on the **sweeping** views around them. There was something beautiful to see in every direction.

From where they were standing, Rachel and Chris could see a string of peaks and valleys **extending** across the sky from left to right. The highest mountaintops were **looming** over the landscape like giants. Chris was almost six feet tall, but he felt tiny compared to the huge mountain range. "It's amazing," Chris thought to himself. "A mountain's height is measured on a much greater **scale** than a person's height!"

Rachel took a deep breath. The air along the trail was cool, and it smelled clean. There were bear tracks in the dirt. Pine trees had needles of the brightest green. Rachel loved being in the middle of a wide **expanse** of nature. It made her feel stronger.

Chris put his water bottle away and looked at his map. "The top of Mount Whitney is only one hour away. Can you keep going?" he asked. Rachel nodded. Father and daughter grinned at each other. Soon they would be looking out from the highest peak in the country. Then all their hard work would be worth it!

**COMPREHENSION** What makes Rachel and Chris's climb both difficult and amazing? What words help you understand the size and height of the mountains in the Sierra Nevada?



