

Rare giant coral spotted in Pacific

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Updated Thu Jul 29, 2010 6:03am AEST

Researchers from James Cook University in far north Queensland say they have discovered one of the world's rarest coral species.

The giant Pacific elkhorn has antler-like branches and is about five metres wide and two metres high.

It was recently found during an underwater survey near the Marshall Islands, north-east of Papua New Guinea.

Dr Zoe Richards says it looks similar, but is genetically different, to a critically endangered Atlantic elkhorn variety.

"There's nothing like it at all known in the Pacific Ocean, so since then I've been looking for it in other locations in the Marshall Islands and I still haven't found it anywhere else," she said.

"It's a spectacular coral for many reasons, both scientifically and just aesthetically.

"This is a very large colony, so it radiates from a central stalk and it has branches that diverge just like the branches of an actual elkhorn.

"They pair off at about 120 degree angles from each other, so the branches are just diverging left and right."

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First posted Wed Jul 28, 2010 4:28pm AEST



Discovery: The rare Pacific Elkhorn coral sits on the sea floor near the Marshall Islands. (James Cook University)