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- [National News](#)
- [World News](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Life & Style](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [Whats On](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Tech](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Cars](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
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## Cross-breeding coral defy extinction threat

Jessica Marszalek | October 21, 2008 - 2:56PM

Scientists have discovered rare corals breaking the traditional rules of nature and cross-breeding their way out of extinction.

New research by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies suggests that a rare coral, faced with a dire shortage of mates of their own kind, has bred with other coral species.

Researchers from the centre, based at James Cook University in north Queensland, studied a rare species of staghorn corals (*Acropora*) and found some of them were hybrids, having cross-bred with other *Acropora* species.

Some were even found in marginal habitats such as very deep or extremely shallow water, suggesting the coral were developing new traits allowing them to push into new environments.

Lead researcher Dr Zoe Richards said the findings were controversial as it went against traditional thought on what a species was.

"Obviously the most common pattern is to breed within your own species and you keep cohesion within your own species and you try and improve your species fitness and you evolve like that," she said.

"But when you're very rare and there's next to no chance of encountering a mate of your own, you're basically left with either dying out as a species or

interbreeding with other species.

"So it's not such a bad option."

The findings show rare coral is not as susceptible to extinction as originally thought, she said.

"This is good news, to the extent that it suggests that corals may have evolved genetic strategies for survival in unusual niches and may prove tougher to exterminate than many people feared," Dr Richards said.

"With such tricks up their sleeve, it is even possible that the rare corals of today could become the common corals of the future."

Dr Richards said researchers would now look at tracing which corals had interbred with which.

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