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Posted on Sun, Mar. 13, 2005

Giving the ocean a health checkup

A group is looking for at least 250 volunteer divers to survey marine life on reefs along the Central Coast.

David Sneed
 The Tribune

An environmental group is recruiting Central Coast divers to monitor the health of the Reef Check, based in Pacific Palisades, has received a two-year grant of \$350,000 from Resources Legacy Fund Foundation to launch the monitoring program.

The group is looking for at least 250 volunteer scuba divers to survey marine life on rocky reefs from Santa Barbara to Monterey four times a year, said Chris Knight, the director of training.

"The Central Coast will be the launching pad for developing a statewide monitoring system," said.

The goal of the survey program is to develop an accurate picture of the state's near-shore environment to give regulatory agencies and legislators the information they need to manage coastal resources.

"Just as it is important to monitor the quality of the water we swim in, it is equally important to check on the quality of our living marine resources," said Gregor Hodgson, the group director. "Once we have an accurate picture of ecological health, we can make better decisions about how to effectively manage these economically and ecologically important resources."

The health of California's coastal ocean is a matter of debate.

Environmentalists cite polluted runoff and struggling populations of abalone, red sea urchins and sea otters as signs that the oceans are ailing. Fishermen point out that populations of many fish species are the healthiest they have been in years.

The reef monitoring program is part of Resources Legacy Fund Foundation's California Marine Initiative, which focuses on the Central Coast. The state Department of Fish and Game identified the Central Coast as the first location for a statewide series of no-fishing zones and marine protected areas.

Data generated by the dive surveys will be available to the public on the Internet using Geographic Information System. The Web site will display the information with charts, ratings and text analysis.

Training of divers would begin this summer. Non-divers who care about ocean health, surfers, fishermen and scientists, are being sought to fill support roles.

For more information, visit www.reefcheck.org or call

310-230-2371 or e-mail chrisknight@reefcheck.org.



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