A12 TopStories | Sun•Star Cebu ■ Sunday, August 21, 2005

Students find rising fish stocks in Cebu sites

BY LIBERTY A. PINILI *Sun.Star Staff Reporter*

FISH population in selected sites in Cebu is increasing, according to results of a survey by a group of students from a university in the United Kingdom.

A group of students from Durham University in the United Kingdom reported yesterday that there is a general increase in the population of indicator fish species, in marine protected areas off Malapascua in Daanbantayan, Olango and Bantayan this year.

This year's survey is a follow-up of a 2004 reef check by another group of Durham University students, also under the Durham University Coral Awareness and Research Expedition (Ducare) project.

The Ducare project wants to help interested local communities improve and sustain the management of their threatened coastal resources.

Indicator fish

In this year's reef check, the group also looked into fish population and coral cover off Balicasag and Tabalong in Panglao, Bohol; and in Cebu, off the islands of Kalanggaman and Capirancillo (Bogo) and off Moalboal town.

The group monitored the population of species like groupers, sweetlips, humphead wrasse (Cheilinus undulatus), bumphead parrotfish (Bolbometopon muricatum), butterfly fish, snapper (Lutjanidae sp.), moray eel, spiny lobster, pencil urchin and crown-of-thorns starfish (Acanthaster planci).

These indicator species were selected because they show the general health of a reef. Their abundance is dictated by "anthropogenic" (derived from human) activities, the group said during the presentation at the University of Cebu.

While an increase in the population of fish species is a good development, the presence of crown-of-thorns starfish is a negative one.

Not only does this starfish eat the tissues (polyps) of corals, an increase of its population indicates a decline in the number of its natural predators, the giant triton shell.

Hard coral

This year's reef check found that in a marine protected area (MPA) off Talima in Olango Island, the population of indicator fish went up to 170 from 59 in 2004.

Population of certain indicator fish species in an MPA off Bantayan and Malapascua Islands also increased compared to last year. There is a population increase in certain fish species outside the MPAs, as well, the group reported.

But the group noted that hard coral cover off Lapus Lapus in Malapascua decreased, from 50 percent in 2004 to 27 percent this year.

The Durham students also observed more coral rubble on the seafloor.

In Jilatagaan in Bantayan, hard coral cover went up to 60 percent, from 50 percent last year.

The group also noted an increase in the hard coral cover of reefs in Capitancillo and Kalanggaman islands.

The group said they consider the Olango Island sites as important because these are near urban areas where "heavy tourism" exists. The students also observed there is enthusiasm for the establishment of MPA among local residents in these areas.

In the open forum, the group also revealed that they saw many giant clams, a protected species, in the public market in Moalboal.

The group recommended that more MPAs be established with political approval and support. It said potential sites for MPAs need to have enough coral cover for regeneration.

To avoid coral damage, the students proposed the installation of mooring buoys outside MPAs. They stressed the importance of educating local people, officials and dive operators about resource management and protection.

Findings will be submitted to Reef Check, a program that assesses the state of reefs worldwide. This year's survey was also conducted with Coastal Dynamics Foundation in Lapu-Lapu City, Padi Project Aware and Reef Check volunteers from Cebu, Spain and the Netherlands.