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Nature's Planned Community

Beneath the skin of the sea, coral reefs glow with kaleidoscopic color and magical beauty. Their habitats also provide life support for our planet. Reefs are under siege from many sources.



Threatened by numerous human problems (such as overfishing) and natural outbursts (such as hurricanes), coral reefs are not infinite. Photo:

MacGillivray Freeman Films)

snorkelers," she explains. "Snorkelers bungee corded the bags onto boogie boards and floated them in. Volunteers on shore schlepped them to the scales." University scientists and students identified the plunder and returned native algae to the water. "It was amazing to see how much people can accomplish by working together," Cindy adds.

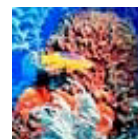
What gets people out of bed and into water work on a Saturday is an urge to tackle the global coral crisis. Overfishing, pollution, and curio-shop collection bode disaster for entire systems of reefs, from Hawaii to the Florida Keys, from the Philippines to the Red Sea. As part of nature's planned communities, every animal, plant, organism, and mineral is vital to the whole in this tropical underwater world. And in many ways, their fragile symbiosis impacts human populations from landlocked Des Moines to seaside Dubrovnik.

By Susan Haynes

On two recent Saturday mornings, a type of bucket brigade outside Hawaii's Waikiki Aquarium would give any beach jogger pause. Seventy-five islanders showed up one weekend, 85 the next, to remove an alien algae choking a nearby coral reef. "Those few people, in that little time, took out 13,000 pounds of algae," says Cindy Hunter, a marine biologist and the aquarium's interim director.

"Divers removed the algae, put it into burlap bags, and handed them to

Reef Roundup



Nothing beats a firsthand experience diving or snorkeling around coral

habitats. Here are favorite spots that educate and inspire.

Within reef systems, myriad species provide food and fishing-related jobs for millions of people. Reef compounds yield lifesaving medicines. Their formations cushion storm damage. Reefs hold important data about climate and ocean chemistry. They entice snorkelers and divers, whose tourist dollars fuel local economies. They even curl waves into thrilling, "cowabunga" spirals. Knowing all this leads an increasing number of people, like the aquarium brigade, to stewardship.



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Threatened by numerous human problems (such as overfishing) and natural outbursts (such as hurricanes), coral reefs are not infinite. (Photo: MacGillivray Freeman Films)

scientists and 1,000-plus volunteers in 60 countries are Reef Checkers. Matt became a Hawaii coordinator.

Thousands of miles from there, in the Florida Keys, a disturbing one-third of the reefs have died or are declining. "Reefs are like the classic canary in the coal mine," says marine biologist Billy Causey, superintendent of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. "They're indicators that we are facing global, regional, and local threats to our oceans."

Sometimes a remedy is as grand as Florida's \$7.8-billion Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, "with, ultimately," Billy says, "positive benefits for coral reefs in the South Florida ecosystem." Other times, it's as simple as one used the Keys sanctuary: In reef areas, boaters tie onto buoys instead of dropping anchor.

Another outside-the-box effort is Coral Reef Adventure, an IMAX film slated for a February release. Producer/director Greg MacGillivray has to his credit 26 IMAX titles, including Dolphins and The Living Sea. When El Nino delivered a blow to reefs around the world, Greg took it personally. He called underwater cinematographers Howard and Michelle Hall and they, with other collaborators, hatched a plan.

They filmed among still exquisite reefs rather than in devastated areas. "It's more powerful to awaken the audience to coral that could die in beautiful places," Greg says.

Though privy to many unforgettable deep-sea experiences during 27 years of diving, Michele remains practical. "The ocean is going to go on," she says. "But if we want it to go on as a facsimile of what we know today, we have to be selfish enough to want to maintain it."

Being selfish works. Millions of visitors head for the Florida Keys every year, "and 60 percent of them go snorkeling or scuba diving," Billy says. "So whether you believe in protecting reefs for economic or ecological reasons, there's something in it for all of us."



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