

# HK coral reefs in 'shocking' condition

By Maureen Pao

**H**ONG KONG'S coral reefs are among the least healthy in the world, ravaged by overfishing and pollution, the first global assessment of the "rainforests of the ocean" has concluded.

"Shocking" overall results of the survey — which looked at 300 sites in 30 countries — were revealed yesterday in preliminary results by the Reef Check 97 project.

Dr Gregor Hodgson, global co-ordinator of Reef Check 97, said: "The results show there has been serious damage to coral reefs on a global basis and suggest coral reefs are in much worse shape than previously thought and not just in places such as the Philippines and Malaysia."

Globally, the reefs of the Red Sea were in the best shape, while those in the Caribbean fared the worst.

Dr Hodgson, a marine biologist at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's Institute for Environment and Sustainable Development, blamed the deterioration of Hong Kong's reefs on open-access fishing.

The unregulated practice led to the near-extinction of creatures such as the spiny

lobster, which was abundant less than 20 years ago. Marine Conservation Society council member Marc Smith-Evans co-ordinated the Hong Kong dives by six teams of six divers to six locations in Hoi Ha Wan, Mirs Bay, Bluff Island, Peng Chau, Shelter Island and the Ninepins.

The dives revealed that of 11 species of edible or collectible fish or shellfish the researchers used as "indicator species", only two — Trochus shells and butterfly fish — were found in Hong Kong.

The findings reflected the global picture, with researchers reporting no lobsters at all at 81 per cent of the reefs surveyed.

Of the 179 Indo-Pacific sites, only 25 lobsters were found in just about 50 sites, with 11 in a single Indonesian marine reserve.

Humphead wrasse, a highly valued edible fish, were found at only 15 per cent of the Indo-Pacific sites, while 41 per cent reported no edible sea cucumbers, which once littered the seabed.

Only 17 giant clams were recorded on Indo-Pacific reefs, compared to 150 to 250 recorded in protected sites in the Red Sea and Australia.

More than 100 scientists and 750 divers from 30



**Plundered: Dr Gregor Hodgson blames the deterioration of Hong Kong reefs on open-access fishing.**

countries participated in the survey, performed this summer. About US\$2 million (HK\$15.6 million) was raised by the divers for the project.

They looked for 21 types of fish and shellfish that normally appear abundantly in coral reefs.

They also looked for evidence of human destruction to the coral itself from practices such as dynamite and cyanide fishing, anchor damage and pollution to gauge the reefs' health.

Dr Hodgson said: "Coral reefs are one of the world's most valuable natural re-

sources, an untapped source of new medicines, a natural method of coastal protection, an attraction for seven million divers and a sustainable source of food. And they are being plundered on a global basis."

But both Dr Hodgson and Mr Smith-Evans said it was not too late to save coral reefs. They advocate protected marine areas, such as the ones in Hoi Ha Wan and Cape D'Aguiar, regulating fishing practices and developing artificial reefs to provide breeding grounds for reef species.

PICTURE BY RORY STEWART