

Barrel sponges dying off Broward, Palm Beach counties

A mysterious disease is sweeping through the barrel sponges off Broward and Palm Beach counties, killing off iconic reef species that can live for hundreds of years and grow to a height of 5 feet.

Divers from the environmental group Reef Rescue first encountered the diseased sponges off Boynton Beach in April, and since then more have been reported in reefs running from the Town of Palm Beach to Pompano Beach.

"Barrel sponge mortality is not unusual; we see these sponges die on a regular basis, just never to this extent", said Ed Tichenor, director of Reef Rescue. "Generally, what we see is a random sponge or two dying, but never anything like this. In less than two weeks we have watched these sponges literally disintegrate before our eyes."

Divers from Nova Southeastern University's Oceanographic Center planned to collect samples to find out what is killing them. Cristina Llorens, spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, said the department is working with Reef Rescue and NSU to determine the cause.

—David Fleshler