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Forest of staghorn coral thrives



It is unknown why staghorn coral is thriving off the coast of Fort Lauderdale but dwindling in other areas, such as the Caribbean (MAGGIE MARTORELL / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD)

Dropping 12 feet below the ocean's surface less than a mile off Fort Lauderdale's beach-front towers, a diver might wonder if he or she somehow got magically transported to a remote coral reef in the Caribbean.

Covering the sea bottom is a forest of maize-colored, healthy staghorn coral with grouper, grunts, damselfish and other assorted tropicals swimming all around. If not for the dusky, green water, bits of floating trash and gobs of algae covering some of the surrounding soft corals, the scene could be the Bahamas or Bonaire.

Why is a threatened species of coral thriving near urban Broward County?

"Nobody knows. The jury's still out," said Richard Dodge, head of the National Coral Reef Institute at Nova Southeastern University Oceanographic Center in Dania Beach. "In other areas, this species is becoming more rare, like in the Keys and Caribbean. We are blessed to have this here."

Dodge, along with representatives from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Broward County and NOAA Fisheries Service, escorted members of the news media aboard captain Jeff Torode's dive boat Coral Princess on Wednesday for what Torode jokingly called "stag filming." Newspaper photographers and television videographers got plenty of images and footage of the site -- but not of corals engaged in reproduction. NOAA Fisheries' Audra Livergood noted that the coral had spawned.

Broward County natural resources specialist Ken Banks said the area, located just south of Anglin's Pier, was devoid of branching coral several years ago. But today, he said, county officials are having trouble mapping it.

"It's spreading so quickly, we can't keep up with it," Banks said.

Banks said researchers recently found a few young colonies of elkhorn coral -- also a threatened species -- off Broward, but "it's too early to tell about that."

Thousands of years ago, elkhorn and staghorn were the dominant reef-building corals off the southeast Florida coast. They can grow 10 centimeters in a year, faster than some other species. But they have declined dramatically here and in the Caribbean over the past 30 years, despite being able to reproduce sexually (spawning) and asexually, through branches breaking off and forming new colonies.

In 2006, staghorn and elkhorn were listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act, but they are treated as if they are endangered. Not only is it illegal to take or damage them. Florida's new Coral Reef Protection Act, which took effect July 1, empowers the DEP to recover monetary damages for boat groundings, anchor impacts and other harm done to the resource.

According to recent economic studies, ignoring damage to coral reefs is fiscally irresponsible. Florida's reefs are worth \$6.3 billion to local economies and support more than 71,000 jobs annually.

Hence, Wednesday's "stag film" tour. "We want to emphasize the value of the reefs and the habitat they provide for creatures, but also the economic value it provides for southeast Florida," DEP's Brett Godfrey said.

Dodge, Banks and other marine scientists look at Fort Lauderdale's staghorn coral forest as a potential source of buds for nurseries in southeast Florida and the Caribbean to help repopulate regions where the species is lagging.

Said Dodge: "It doesn't take long to make a big patch."

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