

Coral reefs' survival off Broward coast surprises experts

by David Fleshler

South Florida Sun-Sentinel, August 26, 2009



Photo by Richard Dodge, NSUOC NCRF

As a place to find an abundant growth of rare coral, the ocean floor off northern Fort Lauderdale appears to hold little promise.

Cargo ships bound for Port Everglades cruise by just to the east.

Condo towers stand at the foot of Oakland Park Boulevard, part of a vast population that generates sewage, lawn runoff and other pollutants that end up in the water.

A fleet of fishing and dive boats descends on the reef on weekends.

Yet over the past few years, scientists have noticed a sharp increase in staghorn coral, a delicately branched species that has declined so sharply that it was listed as a threatened species by the federal government.

On a visit to the reef Wednesday, organized for journalists by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, thick stands of staghorn could be seen through the glass bottom of a dive boat as it cruised slowly in the shallow water.

Reaching upward like human fingers, the corals are part of a regional increase in staghorn that has provided scientists with a rare and puzzling piece of good news about a class of marine life that has been hammered by ship groundings, lawn runoff and global warming.

"In Miami-Dade and Broward counties, staghorn coral is increasing in abundance," Audra Livergood, a biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service, told the group. "We don't know why this is happening."

In 2006 the federal government designated elkhorn and staghorn corals as threatened species, making it illegal to harm them, after years of declines due to bleaching, disease and hurricane damage. But staghorn coral has established thick new growths off southeast Florida, with the best known growths in Broward County and anecdotal evidence of them in Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties.

Richard Dodge, executive director of the National Coral Reef Institute at Nova Southeastern University, said South Florida's coral may have a greater ability to ward off the threats that have devastated the Caribbean reefs.

"It's likely a genetic strain that's a little more resistant," he said. "We haven't had that much bleaching or disease."

The staghorn growths seem to appear wherever the water is shallow enough to let in enough sunlight, up to a depth of about 40 feet, said Ken Banks, a biologist with the Broward County Department of Environmental Protection and Growth Management.

The reefs generate billions of dollars in revenue from fishing, diving and snorkeling. But Banks said we shouldn't assess their importance of protecting them simply in terms of what they do for people.

"There's an intrinsic value to this habitat," he said. "Does it have to be important for fishing or making money for someone's charter business? We've wiped out most of the habitats on land. What's wrong with protecting habitat for its intrinsic value?"

3/24/2011

In the News - National Coral Reef Insti...

David Fleshler can be reached at dfleshler@sunsentinel.com or 954-356-4535. Copyright © 2009, South Florida Sun-Sentinel