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NEWS

Immediate Release
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OIA Makes Technical Assistance Grant To Help Preserve the CNMI's Coral Reefs

The Office of Insular Affairs has made a technical assistance grant to the CNMI government to help preserve the islands' coral reefs.

The grant agreement was signed by OIA Director Allen P. Stayman, and by Governor Pedro P. Tenorio when they were both attending a meeting in the White House Complex on February 25; the meeting dealt with the creation of a new policy coordinating mechanism to give more attention to policies relating to the U.S. islands.

The technical assistance grant, for $40,000, was awarded to CNMI's Coastal Resources Management Program, and was OIA's response to a proposal submitted by Peter Barlas of that agency.

The technical assistance program will have six different segments, all designed to preserve the CNMI's coral reefs, which are valuable not only for their natural beauty, but as a source of jobs and revenue from fishing and tourism, as habitat for numerous species and as protection from storms and waves.

The program, according to Dr. Karen Koltes, OIA's coral reef specialist, will consist of six parts:

1. the development of culturally appropriate coral reef printed educational materials to encourage people to enjoy and respect the reefs;

2. supporting the Coastal Resources Management Program's marine monitoring team through the purchase of needed underwater equipment;

3. the development of an educational CD-Rom on the coral reef environments in the CNMI;

4. supporting travel by the CNMI Coastal Management staff to coral reef conferences;

5. supporting sustainable island tourism through the development and placement of interpretative signs at key beach areas; the signs will tell tourists what to look for, and how to protect the environment, and

6. implementation of a "reef ball" placement and monitoring project, as part of a reef augmentation program.

It is hoped that the reef ball program will serve two purposes: 1) to expand and protect the reef, and 2) to study the effectiveness, in CNMI waters, of this program.

Reef balls are chunks of specially molded concrete that are designed to attract coral larvae, the free-swimming stage in the reproductive cycle of a coral. Coral larvae then attach themselves, or "settle" on the surface and undergo development and growth into beautiful formations seen on reefs.

The reef balls are from six inches to six feet in size, and are molded with many holes in them to create sanctuaries for the coral to live and reproduce again, and thus to restore and expand the reef.

These creatures neither give birth to infants (as mammals do), nor do they lay eggs (as birds and fish do); they reproduce by issuing collections of tiny larvae into the water, most of which are eaten by other creatures, but some of which survive, usually by arriving in a protected bit of rock, such as in the reef balls.

The reef balls will be placed some 25-30 feet or so below water level and in six locations: Lau Lau Bay (the most concentrated site), Boy Scout Beach, Obyan Beach, Ladder Beach, Coral Ocean Point and inside the Main Lagoon. Divers and others are urged to leave then alone.

The Coastal Management staff, with some of the newly purchased equipment, will use a number of scientific techniques to monitor and measure the results of the reef ball placements. While reef balls have been used at various locations around the world, additional information about how they might best work in CNMI waters is needed.

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Editors: If you want an illustration of reef balls, go to this website: http://www.reefball.com/ There is a special section of high resolution photos for editors.