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Coral reef research yields good results

MUSCAT — The Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Environment has joined hands with the Sultan Qaboos University to work out ways and means to protect the coral reefs from human activities such as fishing and water sports.

In a project sponsored by the Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), the ministry and the university are investigating whether artificial reefs can be built by means of reef balls: large, perforated, spherical shells of chemically adjusted concrete that provide a ready-made habitat for fish and a substrate amenable to marine growth, according to a press release issued by the Department of Public Affairs, PDO.

With the help of the Ras Al Hamra Sub Aqua Club, 40 reef balls were lowered into place last year around the Fahal Island and at other locations in Muscat's Ras Al Hamra bay. The reef balls were originally intended to stimulate the growth of "soft" coral. But recent examination of the sites by SQU researchers have shown that "hard" coral begun growing on the structures as well.

Frans Willekes, PDO's health safety and environment manager, said, "We have some great results with the soft coral". The fact that hard coral has started growing on the reef balls by chance shows that this type of coral can be transplanted here. "We now want to monitor this juvenile coral and explore the possibility of transplanting other species", he added.

The speed with which the reef balls have been colonised by coral also surprise the researchers. "It was thought by many that it would take years for coral to establish itself, but the results with soft corals show that nature can do much better than that," Frans stated in the press release.

In a separate initiative, PDO is also helping to stop the erosion of existing, natural coral reefs by donating 17 mooring buoys that will be deployed at reefs along the Batinah coast and at Damaniyat islands.

The buoys are being given to the Royal Navy of Oman who will place them near sites popular with divers. Dive boards will have to moor on these buoys rather than dropping anchor, thereby avoiding damage to the reefs.

From Oman Observer (July 27, 2000)

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