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Scientists Hope to Re-introduce Young Corals

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Sometime soon after sunset on Sunday, billions of orange and pink blobs were expected rise to the surface along the island archipelago, which makes up part of the Republic of Palau. This island chain will once again become home to millions of coral colonies that will soon begin their annual mating process.

The corals will mate in such large numbers that they will form oily slicks that are so massive they can sometimes be spotted from space.

Just three or four days later, the surviving coral larvae will swim to the sea bed where they will form polyps on nearby hard surfaces.

Scientists from Australia, Britain and the Philippines have gathered at Palau for what they hope will be an important step in learning more about the experimental

technique of coral seeding.

Coral seeding could allow scientists to collect new spawn from the mating area for re-plantation in areas where coral reef populations are dwindling due to population, over-fishing and coral bleaching events caused by marine heat waves.

Some coral have already disappeared forever in certain regions, but scientists believe that other regions can be revived .

The team of researchers in Palau will be harvesting their spawn under more controllable conditions at the laboratory of the Palau International Coral Reef Center.

Scientists James Guest, from the University of Newcastle, UK, and Maria Vanessa Baria from the University of the Philippines are searching the sea for a type of coral that is one of the most abundant and most important reef builders. Meanwhile, Andrew Hayward of the Australian Institute for Marine Science, awaits the fresh corals from a nearby boat.

Once the corals are returned to the Palau Center, they are placed in large tanks that are closely monitored by researchers who regularly fill the tanks with seawater.

The corals will be watched over by researchers who will monitor them to see how many will be ready to become young coral polyps.

After the corals in the lab release their sperm and eggs, they will be transferred to children's paddling pools floating in the sea nearby.

Once scientists believe they have a high amount of mature corals, they will be transferred to artificial reef domes of limestone concrete that have been designed for the project.

The team must first dive into the bed to set up camping tents made of fine mesh that will cover the limestone so that the baby corals won't float away after being introduced to their new environment.

Within 24 hours, the team will check on the progress of the coral seeds by removing small tiles they've placed on the reef balls. The process will be repeated months later and again after one year.

Andrew Hayward said although the process will give the baby corals a leg up, it is only part of a very complicated equation that could ultimately lead to the replacement of coral reefs in other areas of the world

"If you boost the number of larval corals settling on a coral reef, so what? Does it make any difference to the longer term compared to an area where you did nothing?" Hayward said.

Only time will tell, as researchers hope to see considerable progress within 12 months of this week's mating session at Palau.

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