

ENVIRONMENT

Thursday, August 18, 2011

Divers, educators learn about coral bleaching, climate change



Nearly 70 volunteers from the local dive, snorkel, and education communities learned how to identify varying stages of coral bleaching at a recent workshop aimed at raising awareness about coral reef resiliency and climate change in the CNMI.

The three-hour workshop sponsored by The Nature Conservancy and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration featured presentations on climate change and coral reef resiliency by marine biologists and ecologists from the Division of Environmental Quality and NOAA's Pacific Islands Regional Office. Volunteer coaches from the Division of Fish and Wildlife, Coastal Resources Management Office, DEQ, and Asia Pacific Academy of Science, Education and Environment Management, or APASEEM, led hands-on activities to familiarize participants with monitoring methods.

In addition to raising awareness about coral reef resiliency in the CNMI, another goal of the workshop is to create a network of volunteer monitors who can help gather current data on the bleaching status of the CNMI's corals.

Coral bleaching is the process through which corals lose their symbiotic algae, known as zooxanthellae, in stressful environmental conditions. Coral bleaching can occur on local, regional and global scales typically as a result of an increase in sea surface temperatures. Though resilient coral can recover after bleaching, prolonged exposure to increased temperatures can eventually kill entire reefs. Managers hope to use the new data to better understand which reefs within the CNMI are more resilient and which are more at risk.

Participants learned how to use a non-invasive, color-based monitoring tool for corals developed by CoralWatch, a non-profit organization based out of the University of Queensland. Using color-coded Coral Health Charts participants learned to collect data on the variation of brightness representing different stages of bleaching and recovery in corals.

The workshop was organized and hosted by the CNMI Coral Reef Initiative, APASEEM, and NOAA.

APASEEM is a nonexclusive professional association, initially begun in April 2004 and formally established in November 2008. The Academy's base is in the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. The goals of APASEEM are to serve as an advocacy-neutral hosting forum for science, science education, and environmental management presentations; to promote discussions of mutual interest amongst regional science and environmental management professionals, teachers, students, and the public; and to help sponsor grant- and donation-funded noteworthy projects within these disciplines. For more information about APASEEM, contact John Furey at jfurey@saipan.com.

For more information on how to participate in CoralWatch, contact Steven Johnson, DEQ, (670) 664-8524, Steven.johnson670@gmail.com or Steve McKagan, NOAA, (670) 234-0004, steven.mckagan@noaa.gov. (DEQ)

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