

TheNational

Scientists launch reef study at Musandam

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DUBAI // The thriving, “breath-taking” coral reef systems around the Musandam Peninsula of Oman should be studied to help save others around the world, scientists said yesterday.

A study of 40 dive sites in the peninsula has concluded that, despite pressures from fishing and environmental conditions, reefs around the peninsula were proving resilient.

Conservationists said the reefs’ success should be considered of international importance, as their study could help preserve other reefs around the world, such as those in the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean.

Jon Shrives, expedition leader and marine scientist at the volunteer group, Biosphere Expeditions, said: “There were just breathtaking big fields of coral ... there were areas where we found 100 per cent coral cover. Reefs in the Caribbean are usually below 30 per cent as an average ... [Musandam] really is of international importance.”

Mr Shrives said scientists would begin a three-year monitoring programme to map the reefs in more detail to gain information on how best to preserve them.

“It is a unique opportunity for us to be able to come at this stage and help preserve these reefs,” said Mr Shrives. “There is an opportunity to prevent the decline that has happened elsewhere.”

The reefs also show an ability to thrive in the harsh local conditions, he added.

“These corals are surviving in water temperature and salinity conditions which would kill corals elsewhere.”

Poorly planned mass tourism, coastal development, pollution, and, increasingly, climate change are the main threats to coral reefs, which are among the most biologically productive habitats on the planet.

The Musandam Peninsula faces increasing pressure from a rapidly expanding tourism industry. Large developments, such as Blue City, The Wave and other coastal resorts, as well as plans to develop tourism facilities, require careful consideration, the conservationists said.

The peninsular study was conducted by the Reef Check Foundation, one of the world’s largest coral reef conservation organisations, Biosphere Expeditions and Michel Claereboudt, an Oman-based marine ecologist and author.

The Reef Check Expedition was born from a 1993 agreement among marine scientists and conservationists to monitor the health of reefs worldwide.

Biosphere Expeditions is looking for volunteers for expeditions in October next year, with spaces available for 24 volunteer divers in total, said Kathy Wilden, the group’s director.

The expedition will begin from Dubai before travelling on to Oman. Although the expedition is focusing on coral reefs on the Omani side of the peninsula, where there is less tourism development, its findings are expected to bring in a benefit for the coral communities on the UAE side as fish populations traverse national borders, the scientists said.

Coral reefs are considered more biologically diverse than rainforests, and are home to a quarter of all marine species, including 40 per cent of the fish eaten by humans.

Healthy coral reefs are natural barriers for coastlines, and can protect against damaging storms and tsunamis.

A study of US coral reef systems in July found that almost half were in poor or fair condition, mostly because of rising ocean temperatures.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration report said their health was “a major indicator of something that could go wrong with the environment”.

Since its last report in 2005, the Caribbean region had lost at least 50 per cent of its corals, largely because sea temperatures have risen, the administration said.



Coral species in the Gulf are under threat from development, tourism and pollution. Courtesy of WWF