
Workshop held for managing, developing coral health strategies

By Hadley Catalano

Wednesday, February 18, 2009 10:44 AM HST

Is coral disease a threat? This was the focal point of the recent weeklong Pan-Pacific Coral Health and Disease Workshop at the Outrigger Keauhou Beach Resort. Biologists, scientists, professors, graduate students and managers gathered from across the mainland, Hawai'i and the Pacific islands to share data and compare information in an effort to understand coral reef deterioration.

"We are here to manage and develop strategies about coral reef disease," explained Drew Harvell, chair of the Coral Reef Targeted Research, Coral Disease Working Group (CDWG), event coordinator and professor at Cornell University. "There are four different centers of excellence (around the world) and we wanted to bring everyone here to Hawai'i with local researchers to share information."

Described as the CDWG's annual meeting, the group, which is supported by GEF/World Bank, was hosted by the Kohala Center and backed by the Bishop Holdings Corporation and Kamehameha Investment Corporation.

"These organizations are concerned with both environmental health and the continuation of reef research in Hawai'i," Harvell said.

Throughout the week, the roughly 45 people enrolled in the workshop met in various discussion groups, held slide presentations on their private research, compared response plans and gathered research observations. The data will be compiled into a paper based on the workshops' conclusions on biogeographic patterns in coral disease throughout the Pan-Pacific region.

Research into coral disease is still fairly new in the Pacific, explained Professor Bette Willis of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies at James Cook University in Australia.

"The first reports of coral disease were recorded in the Caribbean in the 1970s and people have been conducting research there for the past 35 to 40 years. No one even started to research disease in the Indo-Pacific until the late 1990s. From 2000 to 2004 was when the real emphasis started to develop. There has really been less than five years of focused research," said Willis, who led a presentation on current knowledge of Indo-Pacific syndromes at a midweek lecture. "The goal is to start putting together information, look for patterns and trends. We need to establish the baseline data to evaluate the disease to see if it's increasing and then preview geographic differences."