

Hawaii

Tribune

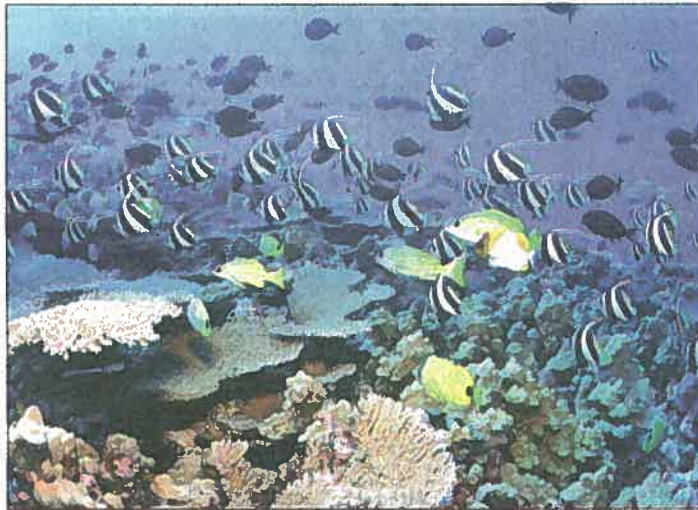


Herald

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One dollar



JAMES WATT/Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument

Fish school at Rapture Reef, French Frigate Shoals, part of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. Scientists gathered on the island last week to discuss coral reef disease.

Scientists discuss coral reef health

By **KARIN STANTON**
Associated Press

KAILUA-KONA — More than three dozen scientists, researchers and reef management experts met last week on the Big Island to try to kickstart a Pacific coral disease network.

Scientists at the four-day Pan-Pacific Coral Health and Disease Workshop, sponsored by the World Bank's coral dis-

ease working group and hosted by the Kohala Center, discussed data collected across the Indo-Pacific region and methods for integrating microbiology and ecology. The aim is to develop an outbreak response plan for coral disease.

"We have baseline levels for many Indo-Pacific reefs," said Bette Willis,

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marine biology professor at James Cook University in Australia. "There is disease everywhere we've looked, sometimes as high as 6 percent. We know disease is a prevalent feature."

Scientists said they now have enough data to begin developing tools that will forecast outbreaks of such coral diseases as white syndrome, a gangrene-like bacteria, or parasite infestation.

Bernardo Vargas-Angel, a coral disease specialist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, has spent the last two years surveying reefs around the Hawaiian Islands, American Samoa, the Marshall Islands and Guam.

He estimated 550 baseline assessments have been completed, including more than 70 site surveys around the main islands of Hawaii.

The diseases and health threats fall loosely into 11 categories, he said, ranging from bleaching to growth anomalies to fungus, parasites and bacteria.

About 2.5 percent of

Hawaii's reefs are affected, said Vargas-Angel, while Kingman Reef is nearly pristine.

Guam has the greatest incident of coral disease.

"Right now, there is a relatively low prevalence with a few hot spots, specifically Guam," he said. "The levels are quite variable across the region. We're doing more damage at a far greater rate than we can do good."

Although the Pacific region's monitoring is behind the work in the Caribbean and Florida Keys where huge swaths of reef have died, scientists do not believe Hawaii and the Pacific region are facing the same fate.

"The topic of coral health and disease is relatively new," Vargas-Angel said. "In some places, it's grim. In some places it appears we are losing the battle."

On the Internet:

World Bank's Coral Reef Disease Working Group: www.gefcoral.org Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center Coral Reef Ecosystem Division: www.pifsc.noaa.gov/cred