



The planted corals



Text and pictures
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There are many issues faced by Sri Lankans when it comes to protecting the country's biodiversity. Most of the issues are being looked into and taken care of. Out of such issues, one thing that has captured the minds and attention of certain people is the protection of marine life. The marine life includes the sea animals as well as the coral reefs and other plants in the ocean.

A project was held recently in Passikudah where Wildlife Research and Conservation Trust (WRCT)

together with Maalu Maalu Resorts & Spa launched a Coral Replanting Programme on Passikudah Beach. According to the worldwide research carried out at present coral reefs are subject to threat and will be extinct in next three decades.

Speaking at the planting programme, guests from the WRCT, Peradeniya University and Tokyo Cement spoke about the problems faced by the reefs in most parts of coastal region in Sri Lanka.

"Coral reef is a unique eco system resource. Coral reef in very simple term is a huge calcium carbonate deposit (hunugal deposit) and in land also you see calcium carbonate. But the 'land hunugal' is formed by physical process whereas the coral reef is formed by a

multitude of marine animals and plants through the processes of slow accumulation and deposition of calcium carbonate (limestone) extracted from seawater" Peradeniya University Head of Zoology Professor K B Ranawana said.

"Once the coral reef is formed it provides shelter for animals in the seas. Some of the fish come and hide in the coral reef to keep away from their predators while other fish hide there to catch their prey. They all come and take refuge in the reef which provides a favorable habitat for the marine life."

People are attracted to coral reef because of the benefits it brings. As a result coral reefs are under threat to a certain extent. When fishermen throw in their nets, they get tangled up with the reefs and when the nets are pulled back on board, the corals break into pieces. Even when you go snorkeling and you step on them, they break easily as they are very fragile or if the propeller of the boat gets entangled with the branches then also they break into pieces.

Coral reef planting

"Coral Reef planting is complicated where you have to get the broken piece and live piece of the coral fixed into a heavy object like a boulder and then replant in the ocean. And this replanting does not stop there. You have to look after the replanted coral. There is an eternal competition between the Coral Reef and the Sea Weed. So if the coral reef is weak or dies the sea weed will take over. The coral grows 10cm within a year and you have to look after them for two to three years as they grow and make sure the sea weed doesn't grow over them."

Speaking at the event

able to conduct a project like this".

Samitha also added that fishermen from Vakaraai come in speed boats and put dynamites straight on the reef to blow it up and catch fish. "We need the local authorities like the navy and police coming in here and helping out with these issues. Dynamite blasting destroys everything from small fish, sea weed to mullet and everything else. If you go to Rumasala the beach is 'two three feet of coral graveyard'."

Conservation

"Even though Sri Lanka is an island, the country has only a few organizations that will work in the marine section which is an important area. It is high time that we, Sri Lankans thought of our sea not as a resource base, but as an asset which should be con-

Rare reef REFILL



One of the guests from the hotel being given a coral to place in the sea.

Samitha Harischandra of the Wildlife Research and Conservation Trust said that the coral planting programme was carried out in many parts of the country. He is a person who is well aware of the importance of restoration of the corals and invited us to undertake this work.

"We conducted a few pilot projects that became 100 percent successful. We did special research projects in the East coast - Arugam Bay, Panama, Komari and Thirukovil and found out that in this particular bay, within about 3 months time some of the corals grow into 25cms. It was unbelievable and we tried to figure out how this was possible.

The major difficulty we faced was finding suitable substance to fix the coral buds. This is where Tokyo Cement came to help by providing nursery reef balls out of their cement and it accelerated our project so much. I am also grateful to UNDP for giving a grant to start on this replanting programme some years ago. And actually if I didn't get the seed money I would have never been able to achieve this moment and never be

served if we want to survive as our livelihood depends on that. We provide the seed money and we need results. Damages caused to reefs can be minimized if people are more careful. So I hope something will be done with this programme to minimize the damage caused to the reef from people stepping on the reef, walking and fishing. Most of the time it is our own people who violate these rules. Usually tourists are well behaved and when you tell them, they normally listen", UNDP Coordinator of Global Environment Sherine Samarsooriya said.

Samarsooriya further said that even though she thought that coral reefs in the north and east are not under threat, apparently it is not so. People are now coming back to the north, settling down and are burning the corals. She stressed that if they can get this area declared a sanctuary, then they will have some control over the area and be able to punish perpetrators. Just like Rekawa, which they fought and got declared as the turtle sanctuary (only turtle sanctuary), if we can get some type of certification, we can do something along with the community", she added further.

Well from what's said above, we all need to work together to conserve our natural habitats and we have to get together to help conserve the habitat of the sea world too. Forest areas which have been cleared will re-grow to its natural form taking a considerable time but if assistance is provided the process can be increased. The adverse weather conditions like storms cause the weakening of the coral reefs.

The coral reef is very much considered to be in comparison to a rainforest under the sea. So if and when the coral are destroyed could it be re-grown to its prior form? Speak to WRCT and other wildlife organizations and see how you can give a contributing hand to save a coral or maybe even plant a coral and claim a reef of your own in the coastal bays.



The corals that were given to be planted

