

Monday, 4th August 2008

Project to restore marine habitat

Published on 04/08/2008

By Peter Orengo

A group of scientists is exploring ways of speeding the recovery of coral reefs in Kenyan waters. Besides being a tourist attraction, reefs are a source of food for marine life, offer shoreline protection and have medicinal value.

The team, chaired by Dr David Obura, wants to integrate science in the management of natural marine resources at the grassroots level. The group has developed a new way of assessing the vulnerability of coral reefs to climate change.

"Reefs cover less than 0.2 per cent of the ocean surface, but they contain about 25 per cent of all known marine species, thus seen as the most diverse of species," Obura told a conference on coral reefs recently.

He noted that climate change was one of the major threats to coral reefs since high temperatures bleach and kill corals. "In 1998, bleaching killed about 16 per cent of coral reefs around the world, and 30 per cent in Kenya. Lots of potential revenue for coastal people got lost," he added.

The team is working with the Kenya Wild life Service and Coral Reef Degradation in the Indian Ocean to assess the vulnerability of coral reefs in Kiunga Marine Reserve. They are also studying reefs in Lamu and the Malindi Marine Park, with the help of Mr Gabriel Grimsditch from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The study is projected to cover Watamu, Mombasa and Kisite marine parks, among other parks in countries bordering the Indian Ocean.

Climate Change

"Data is being analysed, and once conclusions are made, they will be shared with KWS so that the management of the park can be improved in the face of climate change," said Grimsditch.

He added: "Certain spots that are extra-resistant to climate change will be identified, and these can be protected so that they can form the basis of recovery for the reefs."

Meanwhile, an Israeli specialist, Mr Baruch Rinkevich, is using reforestation as a method of coral reef restoration.

Reforestation is the restocking of depleted forests and woodlands. It also refers to the process of restoring and recreating areas of woodlands that once existed but were deforested or otherwise removed or destroyed.

"Because it is a problem of growing significance, it is especially acute in tropical countries. To help stem the tide, people are reforesting those degraded areas," said Baruch.

Degraded Areas

"Coral reefs are hailed as tropical rainforests of the seas. If reforestation can be done in the tropics, it can also be achieved in the seas," Baruch, a senior scientist with the Israel Oceanographic and Limnological Research, said.

The technique involves generating and farming large stocks of new coral colonies in a floating nursery far from predators.

After one year, they are transplanted into degraded areas. Reef-building corals grow where the water is clear, warm, and shallow. These conditions occur in tropical waters near the equator where Kenya falls, and around oceanic islands.