



For immediate release
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HKUST Launches First Global Reef Survey

Scuba-diving students from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology are joining hundreds of divers around the world for Reef Check 1997, the first global survey of coral reefs.

The world headquarters for Reef Check is located in the HKUST Research Centre's Institute for Environment and Sustainable Development.

Between 14 June and 31 August, reef scientists will train and lead more than 100 teams of volunteer divers from 35 countries to measure the health of more than 300 coral reefs around the world. In Hong Kong, student teams from Hong Kong and Chinese universities will be diving alongside those from HKUST.

"Coral reefs are an important natural resource throughout the tropics, but particularly in the South China Sea," says RC Director Prof Jay Chen. "We must raise awareness of their value, and gather more accurate data on how they function and respond to human activity."

HKUST's Institute for Environment and Sustainable Development will analyze the data and report on the state of the world's reefs at a campus press conference in mid-October.

"We have heard that many reefs believed to be in good shape actually have been damaged by human impacts, such as dynamite and poison fishing," said Dr Gregor Hodgson, the HKUST biologist leading the initiative. "However, scientists do not have a clear picture of the health of the world's reefs."

Dr Hodgson first suggested the idea for a global survey on the Internet. "Based on the massive response from serious scientists, I realized that we should go for it." Now Reef Check 1997 is the most ambitious project during the International Year of the Reef.

Over two hundred million years old, coral reefs have been called the tropical rain forests of the ocean, housing over 25% of all marine species, including some of the favorite delicacies of Chinese cuisine such as sea cucumber, live fish and shellfish. Scientists are only beginning to uncover their hidden secrets; some of the newest anti-cancer and AIDS-fighting drugs have been derived from reef organisms.

Coral reefs are vital for the world's largest industry--tourism. Some island regions, such as Hawai'i and Hainan Island, depend on reefs for tourism dollars as well as for fishing. Sandy beaches are created and protected by reefs. Without this protection, shorelines are washed away--a recent occurrence at one beach front resort in Hainan after the coral reef was removed.

The Hong Kong Marine Conservation Society will be coordinating the local diving teams, who will receive special training in survey techniques. For more information, check the Reef Check website, <http://www.ust.hk/~webrc/ReefCheck/reef.html>.

Note to Editors:

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