

THAILAND: DIVING BANS TO PROTECT CORALS



Thai authorities have decided to save local dying corals. Nearly twenty most frequented dive sites have been closed for an unlimited time period.

Thailand has undoubtedly gained a well deserved reputation as divers' paradise. The breathtaking diversity of local marine life has been attracting divers from all over the globe. Such traffic of divers, snorkelers and even fishermen has had a very negative impact on the corals which have started to die. **The authorities are deeply alarmed as in mere three months some sites recorded as much as 80% bleaching of the corals.** Thai National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department has decided to act swiftly, and closed down 18 worst-affected dive sites.

Tourism officials believe the industry will not be influenced in any way as the number of dive sites in Thai waters is so high, twenty closures will not have any major impact. Many diving operators voice their disapproval strongly; they believe that divers are not the cause of coral bleaching; even conservation experts point out that the corals are dying due to the increase in water temperature.

Scientists explain that unusually warm water causes a certain amount of shock to the corals which as a result shed the algae which keeps them nourished. Bleaching in effect means they starve to death. **By banning all divers, snorkelers and fishing traffic, the authorities hope to help restore the former equilibrium thus reviving the corals.** However, the extent of damage is already very large and it may take years for the corals to heal.

In 2004, some local areas reported 20 - 30% bleaching, and the corals took 5 years to recover. Many people do not realize that corals are a crucial article in maintaining balanced marine life. However, Thai officials are aware of this fact and penalties for breaking the ban will range from fines to prison sentences.

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