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Impacts of intensive recreational diving on reef corals at Eilat, northern Red Sea

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Abstract

Coral reefs at Eilat, northern Red Sea, are among the most heavily used in the world for recreational diving, with >250,000 dives per year on only 12 km of coastline. We assessed patterns of dive frequency, diver behavior, and coral damage on selected reefs at Eilat, in order to determine impacts of diving tourism. Frequencies and types of recreational SCUBA dives varied widely between 12 coral reef sites, with >30,000 dives per year at the most heavily-used sites. Field observations of diver behavior revealed ca 10 incidents of reef contact per dive, mostly via raising of sediments onto the reef, but also involving direct breakage of corals. The proportion of damaged coral colonies varied significantly with the frequency of SCUBA diving, and did not depend upon site topography. We conclude that current rates of recreational diving on some reefs at Eilat are unsustainable, resulting in damage to the majority of stony coral colonies. This study reveals consequences of diving tourism at extremely high levels of use. Our estimate of

diver carrying capacity for reefs at Eilat is similar to levels proposed for other reef sites around the world.

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Keywords

Coral reef; Tourism; SCUBA diving; Red Sea; Carrying capacity

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