

Results of Reef Check 2024 announced (with photos)

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) announced today (December 8) the results of the Hong Kong Reef Check 2024 which showed that despite the impact of bleaching this summer, local corals are generally in healthy condition and species diversity remains on the high side.

The Hong Kong Reef Check 2024, a five-month programme started in June, covered a wide range of locations including a number of sites of ecological importance as well as the best coral sites known in the eastern part of Hong Kong waters, spanning from Tung Ping Chau in the north to the Ninepin Group in the south. Among the 33 survey sites, nine were within marine parks, including Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park, Yan Chau Tong Marine Park and Tung Ping Chau Marine Park.

Voluntary dive teams of Reef Check personnel followed international standards when conducting the surveys and data collection. These teams recorded different coral coverage among the survey sites, ranging from 12.8 per cent to 75.1 per cent, with the highest coral coverage recorded at Coral Beach of Hoi Ha Wan. Eleven sites recorded coral coverage exceeding 50 per cent, with five of these located sites within marine parks. In addition, dive teams measured the colour intensity of corals with a specially designed Coral Health Monitoring Chart for Coral Watch when conducting surveys to evaluate the health condition of corals; the deeper the colour, the healthier the corals. The average health index of the sites was 3.95 this year, which remains well above the general average value of 3, indicating that the corals are generally in healthy condition.

An AFCD spokesman said, "Under the influence of various environmental factors, large-scale coral bleaching in Hong Kong waters, which occurred in 2022, has recurred this year. The Reef Check surveys also revealed that more coral bleaching sites were found this summer as compared to last summer. The AFCD has been proactively finding ways to cope with the coral bleaching situation and in August has engaged a group of local coral and marine science experts to consult with and gather their views on conserving corals in Hong Kong, and to explore future directions of relevant research and conservation work, such as identification and enhancement of monitoring for the key environmental factors associated with coral bleaching as well as devising research projects for alleviating the impact of coral bleaching in the local environment, with a view to formulating suitable coping strategies. Corals in most of the bleaching sites have been gradually recovering subsequent to the drop in seawater temperature since last month."

In addition to recording coral coverage and health conditions, Reef Check divers also recorded an abundance of specific indicator species (20 assigned species of fish and invertebrates) when conducting surveys. All indicator species were recorded in the survey sites, including wrasses, butterfly fishes, groupers, sea cucumbers, sea urchins and cowries that were

found in abundance. A majority of the survey sites were found to have a high species diversity. Most of the groupers, wrasses, sweetlips and snappers were observed in survey sites in Port Shelter, Sai Kung; eastern waters; and Hoi Ha Wan Marine Park.

No signs of destructive fishing practices were observed at any sites. Abandoned nets were found at 12 sites but their impact was minor. The AFCD will arrange for their removal.

The Hong Kong Reef Check is part of a global programme to promote sustainable management of coral reefs, which aims to raise public awareness of the ecological importance of corals and the need for coral conservation, as well as to provide updated information on local corals for conservation and management. The Hong Kong Reef Check Foundation held the first Reef Check in 1997. The AFCD has collaborated with the Foundation in conducting the survey since 2000, with growing attention and support from the public. This year, 106 dive teams involving over 1 170 volunteer divers participated in the exercise. To recognise their contribution, the AFCD presented souvenirs and certificates to the participating dive teams and scientists at the Closing Ceremony for Hong Kong Reef Check 2024 today.

Coral reefs are highly productive systems supporting a high diversity of marine life. The AFCD has been dedicated to implementing a series of measures and programmes for coral conservation in Hong Kong. Key measures include designation and management of marine parks and marine reserves; organisation of education and publicity activities to enhance public understanding of the importance of coral communities; monitoring and studies such as the annual Reef Check to assess the status of coral communities of Hong Kong; and formulation and implementation of measures to restore degraded coral communities.



