

For all these reasons, it is essential that we develop a clearer understanding of the global scope of the decline of coral reefs. There are many approaches to obtaining such data, all of which revolve around the trade-offs between exclusive involvements of a few professional coral reef scientists versus increasing the numbers of observers through the use of volunteers. Volunteers greatly increase the scope of the surveys that are possible and therefore greatly increase the sample size of reefs examined. This is what Reef Check has managed to do so impressively over the last five years. The results, although preliminary, support the view that the problems of coral reefs are genuinely global in scope.

Nature is complicated and coral reefs, like other ecosystems, change for all sorts of reasons besides human actions. Thus time series of only five years duration are open to different interpretations and many more years of observations will be required to identify trends. Nevertheless, Reef Check surveys suggest several fold declines in numerous species that are cause for genuine concern. It is particularly disturbing that abundance of reef fishes like snapper, groupers, parrotfishes, and grunts continue to decline in the Caribbean where one might have expected they had already reached rock bottom.

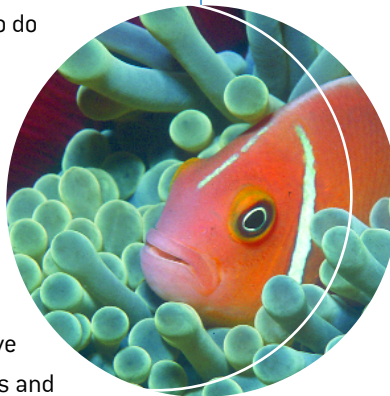
By far the most disturbing results, however, concern the nearly universal disappearance of heavily exploited species from reefs around the world except in a few moderately well protected areas. Nassau Groupers were once among the commonest fishes throughout the Caribbean but were absent from 82% of the 162 Atlantic reefs surveyed. Likewise, bumphead parrotfish and humphead wrasse were virtually absent from the Pacific reefs surveyed except for a few protected areas. This universal rarity of once common and ecologically important species confirms the global extent of coral reef decline.

Last but not least, the volunteer program of Reef Check provides a valuable opportunity for divers and snorkelers to take a first step towards learning more about the threats to coral reefs and the importance of greater care and protection.

Reef Check is to be congratulated for their important contribution to our understanding of the magnitude and extent of the threats to coral reefs around the world.



Jeremy Jackson



Photos on pages ii, 3, and 6 courtesy of Coral Reef Adventure, MacGillivray Freeman Films