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Photo by DAN MELE

Dr. Karen Neely, a coral disease intervention specialist from Nova Southeastern University in South Florida, trains Devon Tyson, a biological technician with the Virgin Islands National Park, to apply a topical antibiotic paste to a diseased coral at the MacLean Marine Science Center of the University of the Virgin Islands as marine scientists gathered on St. Thomas this week to share information and advice on how to combat diseases and bleaching that are decimating the region's coral reefs. **Page 2**

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Scientists gather in bid to combat coral diseases

By SUZANNE CARLSON
Daily News Staff

ST. THOMAS — Marine scientists gathered on St. Thomas this week to share information and advice on how to combat diseases and bleaching that are decimating the region's coral reefs.

"We're not 100% sure everything that's going to happen, but for sure there are going to be negative effects," said Dr. Marilyn Brandt, a coral disease specialist and research associate professor of marine and environmental science at the University of the Virgin Islands.

The most severe threat, Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease, or SCTLD, kills corals with a rapid totality not previously seen — and still little understood by the researchers working to treat dying corals and prevent further infection.

While coral bleaching, "white plague" and other diseases can affect corals, SCTLD has irreversible effects that spread rapidly and could potentially devastate entire ecosystems.

Brandt, together with Dana Wusinich-Mendez, Atlantic and Caribbean team lead at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Coral Reef Conservation Program, and UVI Masters of Marine and Environmental Studies candidate Sonora Meiling convened partners and resources at UVI's St. Thomas campus Wednesday and Thursday to help manage the spread of the disease.

To date, what scientists believe to be SCTLD has only been seen on the Florida coast and on reefs around St. Thomas. Researchers are closely monitoring the reefs around St. John, St. Croix and Puerto Rico for signs of infection, but have yet to confirm any sightings on those islands.

In partnership with the Nature Conservancy, the VI Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the University of Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources and Nova Southeastern University, workshop participants collaborated to develop a response plan that will coordinate efforts between the U.S. and British Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

While species of one genus appear to have a certain degree of immunity to the disease, much remains unknown about its behavior and how it can be stopped.

Brandt said the disease has been reported at depths of around 140 feet, "so it's off the shelf edge" and able to thrive in deeper, cooler water.

Brandt said she's heard from



Photo by DAN MELE

Coral experts gathered Wednesday and Thursday at the University of the Virgin Islands on St. Thomas for a workshop on the prevention and treatment of Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease. The workshop included 60 scientists and resource managers from St. Thomas, St. John, St. Croix, the British Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico who are hoping to stop the spread of the devastating and little-understood disease currently ravaging St. Thomas coral reefs.

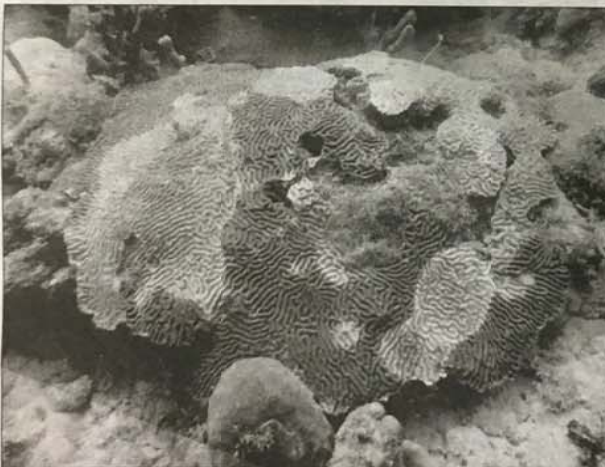


Photo by DR. MARILYN BRANDT

Brain coral affected by Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease shows signs of lesions.

some who claim the disease isn't as serious as is being reported, and who point to the invasive lionfish as evidence that environmental threats aren't as damaging as predicted. But lionfish are an entirely different beast, management-wise, and "we can't eat diseased coral," Brandt said.

Researchers have been experi-

menting with different methods of treatment, including amputation of affected corals and topical antibiotics, but have yet to come up with a guaranteed way to ensure healthy corals won't become sick.

The reason why the disease has affected St. Thomas but not St. Croix or St. John, for example, is still unknown.

The most severe threat, Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease, or SCTLD, kills corals with a rapid totality not previously seen — and still little understood by the researchers working to treat dying corals and prevent further infection.

"These are big holes in the research we should try to address," Brandt said. "Why isn't it over there yet? What's different? What's going on?"

Researchers have yet to study the potential effects of the disease on fisheries, but "there are a lot of downstream effects" on other species when corals die off, Brandt said.

"We've mainly been concentrating on prevention and preparation," said Melissa Gonzalez, National Coral Reef Management fellow for Puerto Rico. The first SCTLD workshop is set to be held on Puerto Rico this coming week, where

researchers intend to "start the conversation" with fishers, dive shop owners and others who will play a part in reporting and managing the disease, if and when it arrives.

It takes precious time and money for scientists to physically survey for signs of SCTLD, and the effects of widespread seasonal coral bleaching and other factors are making it harder than ever to recognize on sight.

While bleaching and white plague usually stop before destroying an entire living coral colony, enabling the coral to recover, SCTLD causes "multifaceted lesions — the tissue just looks like it's melting off, instead of that clean line," Brandt said.

Austen Stovall serves as the National Coral Reef Management fellow for the U.S. Virgin Islands, and spoke at Wednesday's workshop session about the St. Croix SCTLD "strike team," which has been monitoring the island for signs of the disease.

The team conducted 50 surveys at 39 sites on St. Croix over a five-month period "and we have found no SCTLD," Stovall said.

"A lot of this has come from donated resources," including boat time, free SCUBA tanks, and volunteer hours, Stovall said, and "strike teams" are being planned for St. Thomas and St. John.

A \$200,000 grant to the V.I. Coastal Zone Management Division from the Department of Insular Affairs will help train divers and expand efforts for reconnaissance and intervention, and individuals like Ashley Ruffo, St. Croix liaison to NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service, are working to compile available data that will help researchers predict and prevent the disease's spread.

Citizen scientists and volunteers are encouraged to aid in the fight by reporting signs of SCTLD through an online web portal, available at dpr.vi.gov/czm/sctld.

Researchers are also encouraging members of the public to track and report areas of reef that do not appear affected by the disease, or are experiencing bleaching, so they can pinpoint when and where the disease is spreading.

Divers are not asked to try and identify the specific disease present, but should send in reports "on any impaired coral," said CZM education and outreach coordinator Kitty Edwards. "If you're out and you see something weird, tell us."

For more information, visit viepscor.org/sctld-outbreak.

— Contact Suzanne Carlson at 340-714-9122 or email scarlson@dailynews.vi