

Rockhampton grammar students dive for world data



EXPLORING: Rockhampton Grammar School students diving off Great Keppel Island are contributing to world research.

THEY may be still in school, but the work of Rockhampton Grammar School students is contributing to universities and coral researchers around the world.

Thirty students from Years 8-12 make up the school's Reef Guardian Club in partnership with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

On weekends you can find them diving and snorkelling the waters off Great Keppel Island collecting evidence of coral health and biodiversity.

For some, like Year 10 student Kira-Lee Gibson, it's a totally new experience.

Kira learned to snorkel earlier this year in her marine operations class and had never been to Great Keppel Island.

"With the Reef in your backyard you definitely want to help," Kira-Lee said.

"The corals weren't bright and colourful. They were covered in algae because they were stressed from the floods."

Long-time diver and classmate Hayley Mulligan, agreed the coral was not as healthy as it should be.

"The reef near Cairns is spectacular," she said.

"Then you go to Great Keppel which is really beautiful itself, but it does not hold a candle to up there...you know something is not right."

Club members monitor marine life using CoralWatch, a rapid monitoring and sighting system. Data is shared with universities and scientists worldwide.

"We compare the coral to what we see on that scale," Hayley said. "The more colourful the coral is, the healthier it is."

Rockhampton Grammar marine studies teacher Lachlan Roediger said students in Years 8-12 were developing real base-line data which would be studied by university researchers.

"Year 10 marine biology students learn in school that nutrient run off and silt are no longer being filtered by the mangroves or sea grass to the extent they used to, because of coastal development," he said.

"But videos can't really compare to this first-hand experience."

What's the future?

27% of the world's coral reefs have been lost. If present rates of destruction continue, 60% will be lost over the next 30 years

They occupy less than a quarter of a per cent of the marine environment, but coral reefs are home to more than 25% of all marine fish species.

From 1876-1979 three bleaching events were recorded. Sixty are on record from 1980-1993. In 2002, more than 400 events were recorded.

The Bulletin

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