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UH Mānoa researchers involved in study on perceptions of saving coral reef ecosystems in Hawai‘i

An analysis done in Hawai‘i over several years by researchers from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and Oregon State University (OSU) found that most people visiting the state’s coral reef ecosystems enjoy them and care deeply about them, and will generally endorse whatever management is needed to protect them.

This is among the first studies to ever examine what tourists and recreationists actually think about coral reef ecosystems in the islands. The survey suggests that such coral reef ecosystems are so stunningly beautiful that almost everyone wants them protected, making any potential controversies over human use versus environmental conservation to be a rare exception. The core belief is often so strong, in fact, that if it means visitors must be kept out to preserve them, so be it.

“It was really quite astonishing, almost shocking, how much people wanted this resource protected for its own sake,” said Mark Needham, an assistant professor of forest ecosystems and society at OSU and an adjunct professor of geography at UH Mānoa. “Our surveys found overwhelmingly that people visiting coral reef areas did not think that human use and access were the most important issues when it came to these areas. And, if anything was to have a deleterious effect on reef ecosystems, they would want it stopped.”

That attitude was also of interest, Needham said, because Hawai‘i’s coral reef ecosystems—like at Hanauma Bay—are a major draw for the visitor industry.

Added Dr. Michael Hamnett, principal investigator with the Hawai‘i Coral Reef Initiative, UH Mānoa Social Science Research Institute, “This excellent study reinforces the conclusion of a previous study on the value of coral reef ecosystems. There is widespread public concern about the future health of our coral reefs in Hawai‘i, and there is public support for further protection by our resource management agencies.”

The studies were supported by the Hawai‘i Coral Reef Initiative and State of Hawai‘i Division of Aquatic Resources. Needham is now working with Brian Szuster, an assistant professor of geography at UH Mānoa, to examine this topic in other areas of the

state and internationally.

The final reports from some of this research are available online at <http://www.hawaii.edu/ssri/hcri/research/needham.html>.

The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa serves approximately 20,000 students pursuing 225 different degrees. Coming from every Hawaiian island, every state in the nation, and more than 100 countries, UH Mānoa students matriculate in an enriching environment for the global exchange of ideas. For more information, visit <http://manoa.hawaii.edu>.

About the OSU College of Forestry: For a century, the College of Forestry has been a world class center of teaching, learning and research. It offers graduate and undergraduate degree programs in sustaining ecosystems, managing forests and manufacturing wood products; conducts basic and applied research on the nature and use of forests; and operates 14,000 acres of college forests.

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