

EXTREME WEATHER

DANGER OF MASSIVE CORAL BLEACHING

Experts say it will not only affect marine life, but also tourism and livelihood of fishing communities

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REEF Check Malaysia (RCM) is concerned that current unseasonal weather conditions may lead to widespread coral bleaching over the next few weeks.

RCM and scientists from Universiti Malaya and Universiti Malaysia Terengganu are moni-

toring the mass coral spawning event that happens around this time of the year.

Coral reefs around Pulau Tioman usually spawn around the full moon of April and October/November.

However, the RCM team has observed that corals at some of their monitoring sites did not spawn until yesterday, a month later than expected.

"The erratic weather we have been experiencing could have delayed the spawning this year. The worrying part, however, is that the water was 31° Celsius last night.

"If it remains this hot, we are definitely going to be hit by bleaching this year," RCM senior programme manager Alvin Chelliah said.

Coral spawning involves the re-

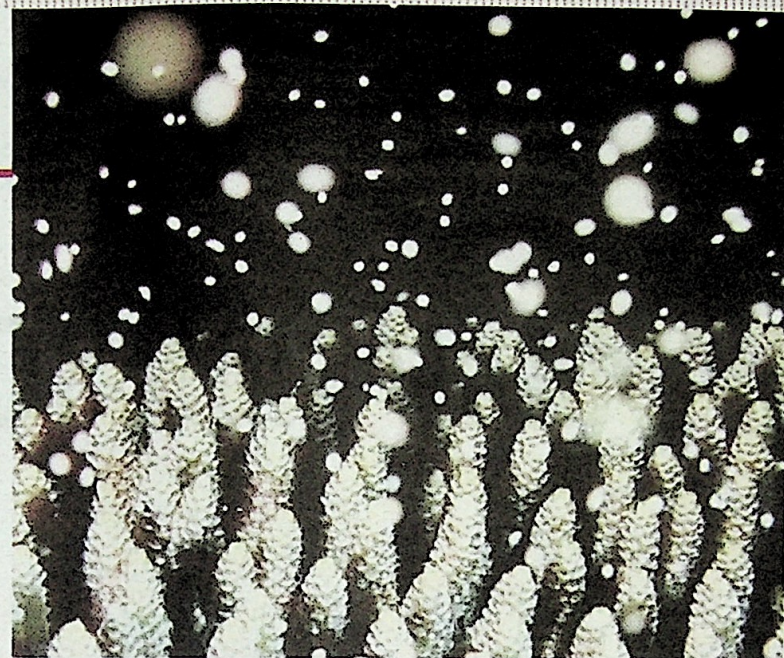
lease of coral gametes into the ocean, which then settle to form new colonies, which would eventually grow into new reefs.

When corals are stressed, they expel the algae zooxanthellae living in their tissues, which causes them to lose their colour and expose the white calcium carbonate skeleton underneath, hence the term "bleaching".

They not only lose their colour, but also their main source of nutrients that come from the zooxanthellae.

Mass coral bleaching may result in the death of coral colonies and affect the wellbeing of marine life and industries that depend on healthy coral reefs.

RCM general manager Julian Hyde said coral reefs were extremely sensitive to the growing impacts of climate change.



Corals spawn by releasing their gametes into the ocean. PIX COURTESY OF REEF CHECK MALAYSIA

"Marine life is not the only loser due to the loss of our coral reefs. Marine-based tourism could suffer and so will the local businesses and community in the area.

"No coral reefs means there will be no habitats, nurseries and food for fish. Fishermen will suffer and there are also implications for our food supply."

The last mass coral bleaching happened in 2010, in which up to a tenth of the country's coral reefs suffered major damage, with about five to 10 per cent of corals dying. Based on RCM's annual surveys, it took five years for the coral reefs to recover.



Coral bleaching happens when corals expel the algae zooxanthellae from their tissues.