

Colombian underwater 'art gallery' serves as coral home

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ISLA FUERTE: On the Caribbean seafloor, an unusual sculpture gallery is taking shape with an equally unusual purpose: to provide homes for corals under threat from tourism and climate change.

Created by potters Hugo Osorio and Pedro Fuentes, 25 figures so far form a sort of artificial reef in the blue waters around the paradisiacal Isla Fuerte, off the coast of Colombia.

They stand 1.5 metres tall, scattered at a depth of about 6m on the seafloor, attracting visitors — mostly fish, but also divers.

The statues have been placed there since 2018 under an initiative named MUSZIF, started by

Tatiana Orrego, a fashion designer and island resident. The plan is for another 25 to follow.

“When I discovered the deterioration of the island’s natural reefs, I saw in the art project a possibility to protect and enhance the life of corals,” Orrego said.

Orrego had seeded the clay sculptures with baby corals, and watched as they took off.

The statues are the “ideal substrate” for the marine invertebrates to grow on, added the creator of Colombia’s first underwater art gallery.

Since the beginning of the year, the world has witnessed a massive coral bleaching episode in



View of sculptures at the MUSZIF underwater museum in Isla Fuerte, Bolivar department, Colombia, recently. AFP PIC

both the northern and southern hemispheres — the fourth such global event on record and the second in 10 years, according to the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

These events cause corals to die off, affecting the ecosystems that rely on them as well as tourism and food security.

The culprit, according to the NOAA: warming oceans. Other problems include damage to reefs by divers and tourists directly.

The Isla Fuerte gallery receives about 2,000 human visitors a year. It offers an “alternative space to take tourists without overloading the natural reefs,” Orrego added. **AFP**