THE STRAIT TIMES

from Ridge to Reef to Ridge of the Somosomo Strait

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CULLING THE INVADERS

With Crown of Thorns starfish threatening the Rainbow Reef local divers step up to clean and cull.

BY MARINE STEWARDSHIP DESK | REPORTING FROM NAGARA



Look closely underneath the table coral, COTS lurk at the Cabbage Patch dive site.

Globally, the crown-of-thorns starfish (*Acanthaster planci*) has contributed heavily to the ongoing destruction of coral reefs. First noticed in Australia in the 1980s, this starfish is a star of dubious stature.

Our Rainbow Reef is not immune.

Early observations in 2016 by Dr. Victor Benito followed local dive operators noticing an abnormal concentration of these toxic, coral-munching invertebrates across key dive locations. He noted at the time: “It’s a plague. We counted 279 when there should have been three.”

In thriving marine ecosystems, COTS play a minor role by feeding on fast-growing corals, allowing slower-growing species space to settle. However, when that natural balance is disrupted, populations explode. The plentiful adults devour live hard coral cover at rapid rates, leaving stark white skeletons in their wake.

THE UNDERLYING MATH

Why do COTS plagues persist despite thousands removed by hand? Science points to three critical ecological factors.

- **Visible target:** Adult COTS are easy to spot and cull, but represent only a small fraction of the population.
- **Hidden reservoir:** Juveniles hide deep inside coral crevices, hidden from view until fully grown.
- **The exponential surge:** A single female can spawn tens of millions of eggs per season. In nutrient rich or algae heavy runoff waters from land, laval survival rates skyrocket.

Recently, local dive resort operators took part in a COTS culling effort as part of an international initiative through PADI AWARE. The current best practice for removing an adult involves injecting household vinegar while it clings to the reef. Boat captain LT reminds divers to insert the syringe from the side to avoid puncturing the reef itself and to take care not to disturb eggs hidden underneath the starfish.

A dedicated team from Sau Bay Resort successfully removed 79 COTS near a favorite dive site, Cabbage Patch, and later culled another 25 at Bat Island.

Longtime resort owner Marina Walser of Dive Academy was also on the water with her teams; their trained divers culled over 150. In just one day on the water, the combined efforts brought the total count to over two hundred and fifty.

Reports from other attentive reef watchers, including the crew of the cruising yacht Wiz, show that independent volunteers have been tracking and culling COTS wherever possible.

In many ways, the COTS outbreak stems from human disruptions that allowed their numbers to multiply—and now, humans are closing the loop by removing them.

While dedicated divers, volunteers, and resort crews are doing their part in the short term, the Strait needs additional support—and a permanent, proactive monitoring system on the water—to stay ahead of the invasion and keep the Rainbow Reef vibrant.



COTS in the bucket. Best place for them.

“We have been with the Rainbow for over 20 years. We garden coral. We clean beaches. We teach our guests. But still the Reef is stressed.”

Marina Walser Dive Academy

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