THE STRAIT TIMES

from Ridge to Reef to Ridge of the Somosomo Strait

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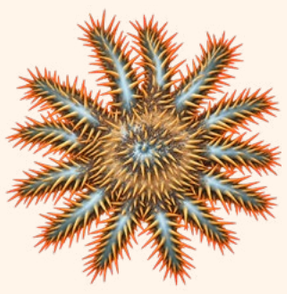
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TIME TO GET MORE LIPS ON THE REEFS

While the vinegar cullers run low on air or need to sleep, the gill brigade operates non-stop.

BY MARINE STEWARDSHIP DESK | REPORTING FROM NAGARA

We can report there have been a variety of Strait operators on the water ridding adult crown-of-thorns starfish. Looking at the data sent to the Rainbow Reef Fiji Foundation, it seems adult COTS are everywhere. Both at regularly visited dive sites, such as Cabbage Patch, and on the home reefs of the resorts. Garden Island and Paradise were *cleaning up the front yard*.



With any mature adult spawning millions of potential fertilizations, any reduction here multiplies its consequences for the better. Nature plays percentages for a few to survive to reproduce.

COTS are adapted to cleaning up coral and keeping a reef thriving. But COTS in large numbers are not healthy. It is a balancing act, with the unfortunate consequence that their beneficial behaviour is eating the very home that supports them.

Enter the gill brigade. **If vinegar is what we use when numbers get out of hand, the brigade is what Nature has already deployed - its own defenders, from the water column to the reef.**



At every life stage from spawn to adult, various fish feed on the crown-of-thorns starfish. Blue chromis, fusiliers, and damsel fish cruise the water column for the free floaters, while larger puffers and emperors (kawago) feed on maturing, coral-bonded COTS. The titan trigger fish (cumu) is fearless in flipping juveniles on their backs and munching on their soft underbellies.

A big gun in the brigade is the hump head wrasse (varivoce), which feeds on mature adults with gusto. Unfortunately, it is also a prize catch to eat, sell, or photograph, which reduces its numbers.

A newly recognized ally to the brigade is the decorator crab. This seafloor dweller loves settling larvae and early juveniles hiding in the rubble. COTS here range in size from less than 1mm to 5mm to 8mm. Not easy for human eyes to spot.

Seeing them isn't the only trouble with juveniles. They prefer the night and staying out of sight, and they aren't coral eaters yet. As they mature, they acquire that taste.

THE COTS LOVERS

Introducing the gill brigade. An assembly of fish whose sole principal weapon is eating from the buffet. Key recruits.

- Whole adults: Hump head wrasse and triton trumpet. Triton trigger fish on occasion.
- Developing juveniles: decorator crabs, small wrasse, spangled emperors,
- The spawning surge and larvae: Blue chromis, fusiliers, damsel fish.

While the cullers sleep, the brigade patrols.

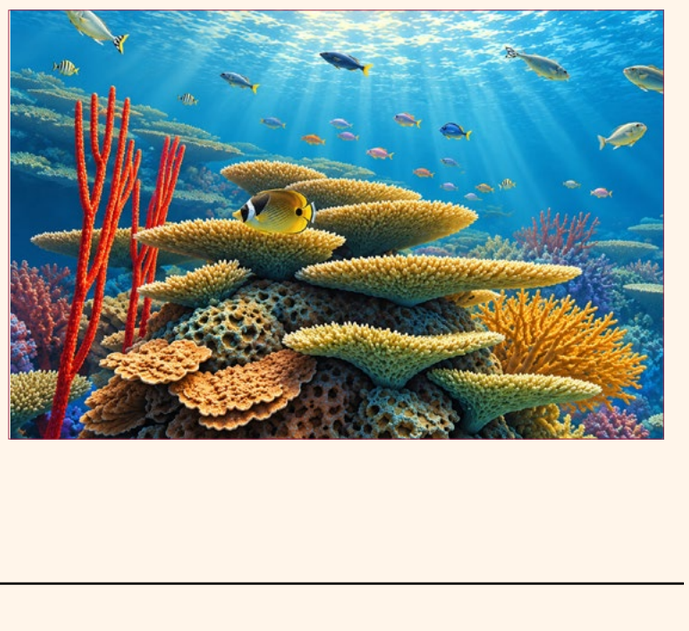
The brigade units interrupt the life cycle numbers before damage compounds. But the math is simple: take out more of the defenders, and the system overwhelms. The all-you-can-eat COTS buffet isn't cleared naturally. Culling targets the adults we can see; the gill brigade works on stages we cannot.

Vinegar syringes buy us time, but hungry fish hold the line. When we protect the predators and keep their numbers up, we let nature clear the table.

After all, don't bunches of fish make visitors to the Strait happy? "*Very fishy today*," they often say. They may come for the coral, but they remember the fish.

Protect the fish. Reduce the COTS. Keep the reef healthy.

Seems like a win all can sleep soundly on.



Best available science, plainly told. The reef is complicated enough without a dissertation.

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