THE STRAIT TIMES

from Ridge to Reef to Ridge of the Somosomo Strait

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WHAT IS A REEF ANYWAY?

What a reef wants. What a reef needs. Whatever makes me happy sets you free. And I'm thanking you for knowing exactly.

BY MARINE STEWARDSHIP DESK | REPORTING FROM NAGARA



Christina Aguilera sang those lyrics with a relationship, not a reef, in mind. Many thanks to her writers. Wisdom comes in many forms.

There has been much written and alarm at the global state of reefs. Many people know exactly what a reef needs. Our Rainbow Reef has been designated a globally important, climate-resilient reef. Does that signal an obligation, or merely confer a distinction?

Over these past months, many have been reporting crown-of-thorns starfish (COTS) culling events and assessing that their removal is likely a good idea. After all, seems reasonable having fewer coral-eating starfish should leave more coral uneaten.

Though what is a reef anyway?

The word came to us largely from mariners. A reef was an obstruction, something to avoid when arriving at an island, particularly if you preferred your ship in one piece.

For those already living on the island, the view was more nuanced. A reef was keeping much of the ocean's fury at bay while allowing a remarkable amount of good stuff through. Fish, food and a sheltered lagoon came with the arrangement. Still not a good thing to run afoul of.

Same reef. Different appreciations.

Geologists define a reef as a structure, sometimes built by living organisms over very long periods. Oceanographers see it as a living city with many co-existing inhabitants who excavate, cement, graze, eat and get eaten. Evolutionists see a reef as a masterclass in group selection - proof that hyper-cooperation and radical interdependence are key forces capable of building structures that outlast centuries of storms.

As ecologists speak of ocean engines, the tourist brochures revel in the exotic attraction of a bucket list event.

And the reef?

A reef is a verb. It is a continuous, active process. It exists because billions of micro-architects are waking up every second and actively pulling calcium out of seawater to build their own floor, wall, and ceiling. The moment that active verb stops—the moment the polyps stop laying down stone—the reef ceases to be less a reef and more mere debris. It is an ongoing act of creation.

On land, the Earth builds monuments out of dead stone and leaves them standing against the sky. In the sea, life builds its own mountains out of its own bodies, brick by tiny brick, keeping the planet alive from the water up.



Much of this work is invisible to us. Sometimes the more we learn, the less certain we become about knowing exactly what a reef needs.

Which need not stop us from doing something useful. Removing a coral-eating starfish might be a perfectly sensible contribution without pretending we have understood the entire enterprise.

So, what is a reef anyway?

A work in progress.

And perhaps, Christina, that which makes a reef happy sets us free.

That is a work in progress too.

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