

The Virgin Islands Consortium

UVI Marine Researchers Need Your Help Mapping Spread Of New Coral Disease Around St. Thomas

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ST. THOMAS -- This year a new coral disease emerged on the reefs of St. Thomas, and researchers at the University of the Virgin Islands Center for Marine and Environmental Studies want the public to help track this fast-acting coral killer.

The center is sponsoring the VI Reef Response Hunt for Coral Disease from August 24 through September 7 to track the progression of the disease in territorial waters.

"The characteristics of this disease closely match that of one called Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD) which has been ravaging coral reefs in the Florida Keys for the last four years," reads a press release by the Virgin Islands Experimental Program to

Stimulate Competitive Research (VI-EPSCoR).

"Researchers are unsure yet how it got to St. Thomas, but it is clear it is having devastating effects on the reefs. The disease first emerged near Flat Cay, on the south west side of the island and has spread west as far as Savana Island with alarming speed. It has also started spreading east along the north side of St. Thomas and has recently been spotted off of Santa Maria Bay. There have been mixed reports of the disease near Hull Bay," the release said.

According to the VI-EPSCoR, the newly identified coral disease:

- Has no known cure
- Kills stony corals (brain coral and pillar coral) very quickly
- Is harmless to humans

VI-EPSCoR said researchers are working hard to find a way to slow the spread of the disease and potentially stop it altogether. It's critical to identify exactly how far the disease has spread around St. Thomas. "At this time, Hull Bay is suspected to be the frontline to the north and Buck Island is the suspected frontline at the south," the release said.

The community can help refine the frontline of the disease by visiting their favorite coral reef and report back their findings, according to VI-EPSCoR. "Reports of healthy corals and healthy reefs are just as important as reports of diseased corals."

To join The Hunt and learn more, visit <https://viepscor.org/the-hunt-for-coral-disease>

VI-EPSCoR said it is not necessary for you to be an expert to make a report. Identifying coral disease is very difficult. Many diseases look alike and are difficult to distinguish from predation or other afflictions. "We only ask for your best description or photos. Your eyes on the reef are critical to this mission," VI-EPSCoR said.

Participate in the Coral Disease Identification Workshop at Hull Bay Hideaway on August 23, 2019. The VI Reef Response Hunt For Coral Disease will take place from August 24th to September 7th.

VI-EPSCoR issued a statement on personal safety for those helping with the hunt: You are responsible for your personal safety. Engaging in snorkelling and SCUBA diving activities is inherently risky. Only experienced snorkelers and SCUBA divers should consider surveying coral reefs for coral disease. Do not go out in dangerous weather. Also, while coral diseases are not a danger to humans, do not come in contact with corals or other marine life. Many marine animals and plants have stinging cells, sharp edges, or other characteristics that can be harmful to humans.

Quick links:

VI EPSCoR www.viepscor.org <<http://www.viepscor.org>>

More information about The Hunt <https://viepscor.org/the-hunt-for-coral-disease>

Register for The Hunt <https://viepscor.org/register-for-coral-disease-hunt>

Coral disease locations map

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?ll=18.04345664954556%2C-64.85349500000001&mid=16JIZBlcvvjnd3MrgriHuPNTI60-HFEPy&z=10>

VI Reef Response <https://viepscor.org/vi-reef-response>

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