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Mass Sea Urchin Die-off In USVI, Several Other Caribbean Islands Not Seen Since 1983 is Threatening Already Fragile Coral Reefs, Scientists Warn

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Sea urchins washed up on beach shore. By. GETTY IMAGES

Mass die-off of sea urchins in several Caribbean islands, including the U.S. Virgin Islands, Dominica, St. Lucia, Antigua, Cozumel in Mexico, St. Vincent, Jamaica and Saba has raised alarms among scientists who say the phenomenon is threatening already fragile coral reefs in the region.

Scientists had originally linked the die-off to the *Diadema antillarum*, known as the black sea urchin, however two other species — the rock boring sea urchin and the West Indian sea egg — have also been affected.

Patricia Kramer, a marine biologist and program director at the Atlantic and Gulf Rapid Reef Assessment expressed particular concern that the die-off was occurring so quickly.

According to the Associated Press, Dana Wusinich-Mendez, Atlantic-Caribbean team lead for the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's coral reef conservation program, stated, "Losing our sea urchins would be really devastating."

Sea urchins are known for being reliable grazers removing macro algae from coral reefs, which clears space for baby sea corals to attach themselves, both Kramer and Wusinich said.

In February, the V.I. Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources said the territory [was experiencing an unusual die-off event of Long Spined Sea Urchins](#). "This is particularly concerning because in the early 1980's over 90 percent of the natural populations of these urchins were killed by a disease and researchers are worried that this could be a new emergence of disease," D.P.N.R. said. "These urchins are vital to the health of our coral reefs because they eat the algae that try and smother coral reef colonies."

According to the AP, the Atlantic and Gulf Rapid Reef Assessment recently helped create a network to investigate the deaths, analyze tissue samples and find solutions. Among participants of the investigatory team is the Florida-based Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute along with almost two dozen groups in the Caribbean and U.S.

D.P.N.R. said it needs help from the public to report any dying/dead urchins around the territory. Science Direct has a detailed history of Sea Urchins [here](#).