

Coral bleaching could get worse, experts warn

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KEY WEST — Warm temperatures and lack of wind in the Keys are again causing coral to bleach, but marine experts say the problem is not as severe as previous years.

At least, not yet.

During a recent dive at Looe Key, officials from the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary spotted several pieces of coral that were pale in color. Minor bleaching on brain coral and anemones in the Tortugas also has been reported by marine scientists doing research there.

While not necessarily fatal to the coral, bleaching is one of the more common phenomena facing reefs today, said sanctuary spokeswoman Cheva Heck. In 1990, nearly 65 percent of the fire coral on the shallow reef crest at Looe Key was lost because of bleaching. A considerable amount of coral also was damaged or destroyed during major bleachings throughout the Keys in 1997 and '98.

With surface temperatures at Looe Key at already 80 degrees, scientists said this year's bleaching could model previous events given the early summer start.

The bleaching "is very minor now, but as the temperatures start to climb, we're probably going to see a lot more," said Walt Jaap, a coral scientist with the Florida Marine Research Institute.

"When we experience cloudy or rainy conditions, the expectations [of bleachings] are less, but when we see lots of sunshine and low winds, it's practically a given."

Although there are numerous causes of coral bleaching, many are related to environmental degradation and reef exploitation.

Also, studies have linked bleaching to increases in ultraviolet radiation and high temperatures associated with global warming. When the water is unusually warm or calm — as it's been since May — more ultraviolet radiation is able to reach the reef.

When the mercury rises, corals respond by expelling their symbiotic algae, known as *zooxanthellae*.

The result is known as bleaching, which leaves coral looking stark white and skeleton-like. Corals can recover if the stress is not severe, but bleaching typically affects long-term growth and reproduction.