

# Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease Management Update

Since 2014, a new coral disease has been spreading from the reefs of Florida around the north Caribbean, resulting in mass casualties of stony corals. Known as the Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD), this disease appears to be fast spreading and extremely lethal. Experts from around the Caribbean met early August to discuss lessons learned from Florida's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP)'s management of this disease and discuss best practices for identifying and treating infected corals.

## The Disease

A new coral disease was first spotted off the coast of Florida in 2014. Since then, it has spread throughout much of the north Caribbean, including Mexico, Jamaica, Sint Maarten, the Dominican Republic, and the U.S. Virgin Islands (AGGRA, 2019). This disease is known as SCTLD and to date it has only been seen in stony corals and causes significant tissue loss within affected hosts. This disease spreads fast and can have devastating affects on the reef if not treated immediately (Florida DEP, 2019). Dr. Andy Bruckner, Research Coordinator at Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary stated "*Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease affects some of the slowest-growing and longest-lived reef-building corals, including the iconic brain corals, star corals and pillar corals.*"

## Symptoms

When a coral contracts SCTLD it begins with visible lesions which spread out from around the edge. Here the coral tissue can become detached or completely removed, which leaves the coral structure as a bare skeleton typically becoming covered in algae within a week (Florida DEP, 2018). SCTLD can spread rapidly, at a pace of 20-40 cm<sup>2</sup> a day for highly susceptible coral species and 5-10 cm<sup>2</sup> a day for intermediately susceptible species (Martinelli, 2019). Without intervention, Florida has seen nearly a 100% mortality rate of infected corals with this disease (Martinelli, 2019).

## Transmission

It is now believed the SCTLD is transmitted through direct contact and water circulation (Reef Resilience, 2019). To minimize its spread, officials are now recommending extreme caution for divers around infected corals, and urge divers to fully decontaminate their gear between dive sites to avoid spreading the disease (Florida DEP, 2019). In addition, it is strongly encouraged that if a coral is suspected of being infected, it should be reported to the appropriate authority immediately to begin increasing public awareness and direct intervention (Florida DEP 2019).

## Knowledge Sharing

On August 1st of this year, a group of 22 experts from 17 countries met in Key West, Florida to

share information and discuss how to best manage SCTLD outbreaks (GCFI, 2019). Participants were able to work directly with leading SCTLD experts from Florida and learn how to properly identify the disease and manage infected corals effectively. Florida has had positive results treating infected corals with a variety of antibiotic regimes; however, this is still being tested and regulatory frameworks concerning the use of such treatments varies between countries (Reef Resilience, 2019).

## Protecting the Future

With harsher environmental conditions stressing corals, these species will continue to become more susceptible to disease in the future. SCTLD is of particular concern as it appears to be long lasting (present since 2014), easily spread over a wide area, it affects a high number of slow growing, reef building species and has been seen to result in total colony mortality once infected (Martinelli, 2019). Increasing public awareness and proper diving practices will be crucial for managing this disease. Researchers are continuing to test intervention methods to minimize the spread of this disease. Until this disease is better understood, it is crucial for divers and researchers to carefully track its progression. If you believe you've spotted an infected coral, please report its location, and if possible, a photograph, to your local marine park authority.

View the Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease Management Letter:

<https://www.dcnanature.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/SCTLDReport-Online.pdf>

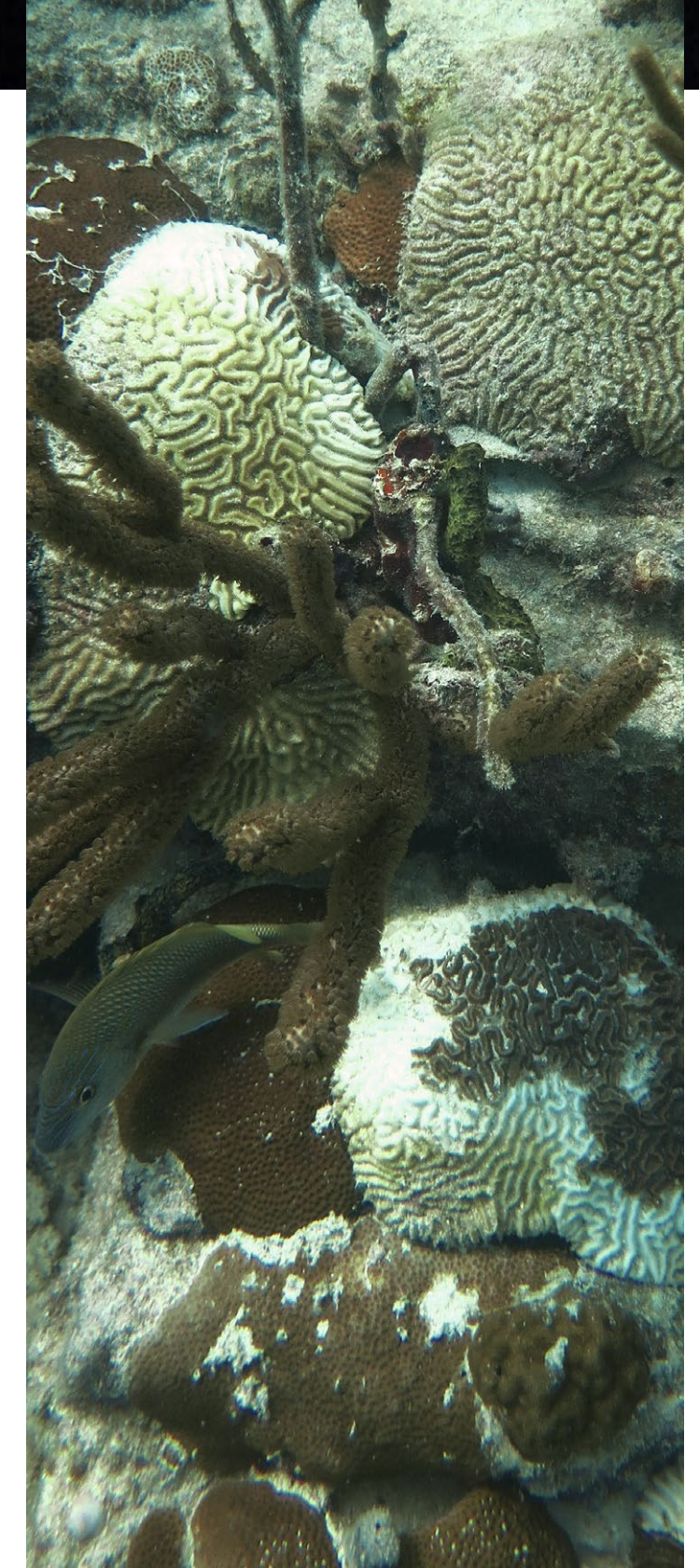


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