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Red Sea, Skin Divers and Researchers Defend It

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Obtain information of the state of marine biodiversity in the area of Sharm el Sheikh thanks to the collaboration of skin divers that are on holiday; promote environmental education and provide a contribution to the development of sustainable tourism. These are the goals of the research "Scuba Tourism for the Environment- Red Sea Biodiversity Monitoring Program". It is a five-year project devised by the Department of experimental and evolutionary biology of the University of Bologna that will take place at Sharm and at Hurgada, in Egypt. Starting in 2007 around 100 thousand pamphlets a year will be distributed in hotels and diving schools in various languages. The first part of the pamphlet is dedicated to respecting nature: recommendations and advice to not ruin the coral reef. In the second part there are pictures of fish and vegetable species chosen by the researchers because they are easily identifiable. In the end, a third section for observation: here the skin divers report the organisms observed in immersion including those in the previous photos. The project is financed by a total of 170,000 euro donated to the University of Bologna from the Egyptian minister of tourism, from ASTOI (Association tour operator italiani) and from Project AWARE Foundation, an important Swiss foundation for the support of marine nature (for the first time it decided to finance a multi-year project.) SSI, SNSI, the underwater didactics agencies and ULP, the environmentalist association, will bear the press expenses for the observation pamphlets (for more information go to www.marinesciencegroup.org and www.STEproject.org). The magazines Tuttoturismo and Quark will divulge the research, contributing to the involvement of the skin divers. In sum, it is a perfect union between the world of university research and excited tourist skin-divers. "Two million Italians go to Egypt every year - explains Stefano Goffredo, one of the inventors of the project - and half of them visit the coral reef. Thus, our goal is to involve the citizens in the monitoring of the environment and increase citizens' awareness of nature so as to improve the impact of tourism on the environment." This methodology in the U.S. is called "science of citizens" and was not a novelty for the researchers from the University of Bologna. It was already used in 1999-2001 in another project, "Mission Hippocampus Mediterranean" and in 2002-2005 in "Skin diving for the Environment". 20 thousand pamphlets were filled out in this last research in all of Italy (10% was rejected). Around 4 thousand people participated for a total of 15 thousand hours of emersion and a savings of 4 million euro. For the same investigation a single biologist would have committed 35 years of his life.

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