

AS I SEE IT

The coral reef of Eilat (northern Red Sea) requires immediate protection

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The recent debate in MEPS between Rinkevich et al. (2003) and Loya & Kramarsky-Winter (2003), concerning the possible effects of intensive fish farming on the health of corals in the Gulf of Eilat/Aqaba (northern Red Sea), illustrates the difficulties in discerning to what degree eutrophication affects coral reefs.

Many of the studies cited by both sides have yielded contradicting results, and in some studies certain results seem to favor the hypothesis that 'fed corals are happy corals', while others point to perverse ecological effects of eutrophication. Rinkevich et al. (2003; also Bongiorni et al. 2003) embrace the former theory, and suggest that the degradation of the reef of Eilat is caused instead by intensive SCUBA diving. They forget that an alarming decrease in coral cover has been documented at sites where diving and swimming are banned, including parts of a nature reserve.

Although further studies are needed before intensive fish farming (or any other human activity) is 'blamed' for the demise of the coral reef of Eilat, the fish farms should irrefutably demonstrate that their actions do not imperil the few remaining healthy reef sites before they continue their current nutrient releases. There is abundant scientific evidence showing that the anthropogenically impacted Gulf of Eilat/

Aqaba is not a propitious place for coral reefs, and it would be surprising if eutrophication played no role in reef degradation.

Time is running out, and the coral reef of Eilat should not become the testing grounds for new paradigms. The environmental authorities in Israel must embrace the Precautionary Principle and acknowledge that the benefit of the doubt justifies immediate action for the survival of the only coral reef in the country. If the scientific community unites behind this call, its voice would be an important catalyst for policies to protect the remaining coral reef.

LITERATURE CITED

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