

## Protection does help endangered species: study

Researchers have come by evidence that protected fish species can bounce back rapidly from the brink, even after heavy fishing has taken its toll.

A strict no-fishing policy in 2004 across a third of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR), the largest and most complex of marine ecosystems, has ensured spectacular recovery in coral trout numbers by a whopping 31 to 75 percent.

These results have major ramifications in a world in which most major fisheries are in decline, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

Closing the reefs to fishing was controversial, both politically and socially, and there was huge public interest in the outcome, the researchers said. This makes accurate assessment of the effects of closure essential.

"We were very agreeably surprised at the speed at which coral trout populations recovered -- and also the sheer scale and consistency of the response," said Garry Russ, who led the research team.

Closed inshore reefs in the Palm and Whitsunday islands showed increases in coral trout population densities of 65 and 75 percent, respectively, compared with paired reefs left open to fishing.

"The results are very convincing, because we surveyed such a huge area -- 56 reefs spread over more than 1,000 km from north of Cairns to the Capricorn-Bunker islands in the south," said Peter Doherty, a member of the team.

"The data from these reefs was remarkably consistent -- and we were pleasantly surprised to observe such rapid improvements in fish densities."

"Our findings show that large scale reserve networks, set up to protect biodiversity and ecosystems, can produce rapid positive responses for harvested species. It is an important lesson for the entire world," informed Prof Russ of ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies.

The findings of the research have been reported in the latest issue of the journal Current Biology.

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