The health of coral reefs around the world—and the degree to which “sport divers” can be of help detecting problems in these complex communities—is discussed by reef scientists, some of whom will attend an upcoming meeting in Costa Rica where reef diseases will be evaluated.

**ASSESSING CORAL REEF HEALTH**

*Thomas J. Goreau*, Global Coral Reef Alliance, 324 Bedford Road, Chappaqua, New York 10514 USA E-mail: goreau@earthlink.net; *Andrew W. Bruckner*, Department of Marine Sciences, University of Puerto Rico, P.O. Box 908, Lajas, Puerto Rico 0667-0908; *James Cervino*, Global Coral Reef Alliance; *Raymond L. Hayes*, Howard University College of Medicine, 520 W Street, N.W. Washington, District of Colombia 20059 USA; *Ivan Nagelkerken*, Caribbean marine Biological laboratory, Piscadera Bay, Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles; *James W. Porter, Karen G. Porter*, Institute of Ecology, Department of Ecology and Marine Sciences, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602-2202 USA; *Laurie L. Richardson*, Department of Biological Services, Florida International University, Miami, Florida 33199 USA; *Deborah L. Santavy*, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Gulf Ecology Division, 1 Sabine Drive, Gulf Breeze, Florida, 32561-5299 USA; *Garriet W. Smith*, Biology Department, University of South Carolina at Aiken, 41 University Parkway, Aiken, South Carolina 29801 USA; *Ernest H. Williams, Jr.*, Department of Marine Sciences, University of Puerto Rico, P.O. Box 908, Lajas, Puerto Rico 0667-0908

We are part of a group of researchers, experienced in field recognition of Caribbean coral reef diseases, who are compiling data on emerging coral diseases around that region. The number of individuals currently able to correctly identify all forms of coral disease, bleaching, and other types of mortality in the field is limited, yet among them there still exist no firm consensus on the terminology or diagnostic features of many, perhaps most, diseases. This confusion is illustrated by the caption to the photograph accompanying
Bischof’s article (p. 1494), which identifies markings on coral as “white plague disease.” Two comprehensive (in preparation) compilations of coral diseases each describe “white plague disease” as completely different diseases, and neither of these diseases is the one called that in the photograph.

The need for accurate assessment is urgent. Diagnostic criteria to identify different coral reef species and diseases are too subtle and require too high a proficiency in taxonomic identification to be adequately taught to sport divers during a single 1-hour training course in all of coral reef ecology. We therefore expect that the Reef Check survey could obscure or confuse the differences between diseases, bleaching, and other causes of mortality, and thus would not provide the kind of accurate data that researchers on coral diseases could use. Support is urgently needed for field monitoring efforts to document the spread of new and old diseases, and for laboratory work to identify them and their causes, before the significance of this rapidly intensifying threat to coral reefs can be understood. A workshop is scheduled to evaluate all current Caribbean coral reef diseases and produce a common classification scheme and nomenclature at the Association of Marine Laboratories of the Caribbean Annual Meeting, hosted by the University of Costa Rica in San Jose, Costa Rica, from 21 to 25 July 1997.