

Dive in to help save coral reef

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ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

FIRST the Great Barrier Reef offered the best job in the world, now the marine playground is offering the world's best conservation work.

The Australian Institute of Marine Science and Earthwatch Australia need volunteer divers to help scientists survey the spectacular coral reef off beautiful Orpheus Island.

They want to find out how the north Queensland island's reef has been affected by Cyclone Yasi, if coral is becoming diseased and to assess climate change impacts.

One of the reef's most spectacular and diverse marine habitats, the fringing reef at Orpheus, is also at risk from rising sea temperatures.



CONSERVATION WORK: Scientists need volunteers to research the effect of climate change on the Barrier Reef.

AIMS scientist David Bourne said yesterday that last year's Cyclone Yasi had caused major damage in the region.

"Reefs are recovering but we won't have the full picture until we dive," Dr Bourne said.

"We're going out on Monday to have a look. Corals get diseases just like humans. And they get sick more easily when they are stressed."

The executive director of Earthwatch Australia, Richard Gilmore, said

volunteer divers would experience a part of the marine park that was filled with an unusually wide variety of reef habitats, clam gardens as well as submerged indigenous sites and shipwrecks.

"It's a great way to experience something different, while making a difference to this important World Heritage site," Mr Gilmore said.

Dr Bourne said the research would assess the seasonal dynamics of coral diseases and the role of other ecosystem stresses such as temperature, light and water quality on disease progression.

Orpheus is 1190km northwest of Brisbane. The first team heads out on March 12 with a second team on August 30. To sign up call Earthwatch on (03) 9682 6828 or visit earthwatch.org.au.