Snorkelers can volunteer to be saviors of reef at Kaanapali

KIHEI — The Kahekili Herbivore Enhancement Area (HEA) Project needs volunteers to assist with snorkel surveys that could help save the reef at the site, which is also known as North Kaanapali or Airport beach.

Volunteers will receive training on:

• Feb. 7 from 6 to 7:30 p.m. at the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary Education Center in Kihei.

• Feb. 9 from 9 a.m. to noon at Kahekili Beach Park, ocean conditions permitting.

Herbivorous fishes and urchins eat algae, or seaweed, that grows on the reef, and studies in Hawaii have shown that reefs with abundant herbivorous fishes have fewer problems with invasive seaweed growth.

An HEA designation could help create conditions for healthy reefs.

“At Kahekili, the reef shows signs of stress with seasonal invasive algal blooms and decreasing coral cover,” said Emily Carlson, coordinator of the sanctuary’s volunteer programs and outreach. “However, it is not beyond help and it could potentially recover with the assistance of some hungry fish.”

“In order to help increase stocks of herbivorous fish, we need to reduce the amount of these critical grazers that are harvested from our near-shore waters, and we should stop providing these fish with other sources of food,” Carlson said.

“If fish are eating peas (or other provided foods), they will not be able to eat as much algae,” she said.

Volunteers will gather data on what herbivorous fishes are eating and at what rate.

Declining coral health, fewer living corals, increased algal cover and fewer grazing fishes are signs that a reef may be approaching a tipping point. This picture shows the reef at Kahekili Beach, where volunteer snorkelers are needed to collect data that can help protect the site.

“The protocols are simple and fish subjects are limited to three families: parrotfishes, surgeonfishes and chubs,” Carlson said.

The state Department of Land and Natural Resources is developing the rules that will create the HEA designation.

The Kahekili study is funded by the Hawai’i Coral Reef Initiative, and the research is led by professor Celia Smith’s laboratory at the University of Hawaii at Manoa’s Botany Department.

For more information or to register for the training, contact Darla White at (808) 345-2312 or darla.white@hawaii.edu.