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Visitors drive fish count

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IT'S driven primarily by visitors to our shores, and has been seen as a great way to strengthen Fiji in the minds of tourists.

But the Great Butterfly Fish count is also a way of helping us understand just how healthy our reef systems are.

The nationwide tourism promotion was organised to raise international awareness of Fiji's marine environment. Over the last week, it saw island resorts and scuba diving companies marshal their guests through a fish count all over the country.

The Mamanuca Environment Society believes the Great Butterfly Fish count is an ideal way for visitors to participate in an important reef monitoring activity.

MES project manager Betani Salusalu said the health and growth of reefs could be determined by the existence of butterfly fish.

Abundant fish in reef systems provide scientists with a good indication of coral cover and coral health in particular areas.

Mr Salusalu said the growth and health of coral reefs were important not just for the tourism industry but for the future of marine species themselves.

"For the Mamanuca Group all resorts participated in the Great butterfly fish count," he said. "Under the International Year of the Coral Reef 2008, The Great Butterfly Fish Count activity was initiated by the Government and other stakeholders including MES for the week of November 2nd -8th".

The butterfly fish are in the family Chaetodontidae and have deep, compressed bodies. They are oval-shaped when seen side-on, and thin when seen head-on.

They have small, pointed mouths, with small, brush-like teeth. There are 116 species across the globe, including their close cousins, the bannerfish.

Most live in tropical waters and are found where there are extensive areas of live coral, which is usually in areas of 20 metres of water or shallower.

"The activity was for the whole of Fiji to take part in, to count these fish and collate all the data from throughout Fiji as part of monitoring and identifying Coral Health and Coral Cover.



Top, butterfly fish right at home in the waters of the Mamanuca Group.

"That's why we created an activity that would be enjoyable and could also be integrated into activities currently used in all resorts in Fiji."

Mr Salusalu said MES helped resorts in the Mamanuca Group create environmental awareness programs for various island resorts.

He said the programs not only involved staff and management but also tourists who stayed at the various resorts.

Reef Safari dive instructor Joseph Donne said the week-long butterfly fish count was very important.

They had an innovative way to get tourists to sign up a trip in their Yellow Submarine glass water boat. The trips were at South Sea Island and drew a lot of interest.

"We take about 25 passengers out to the submarine where each of them are given a slate each and are asked to tick the different types of butterfly fish they see whilst in the submarine underwater," he said.

"It's easy to do and lots of different types of people with an interest in the marine environment have been taking part in the search for butterfly fish throughout the week".

The promotion, from November 2-8, was aimed at strengthening Fiji's tourism industry and the natural environment.

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