

Students volunteer to check health of reef

By KAREN INGRAM

A GROUP of Townsville marine biology students has taken a first step toward becoming trained coral reef monitors.

The four students from James Cook University are participating in a Reef Check program to teach volunteers the skills necessary to assist with ongoing monitoring and assessment of the health of coral on the Great Barrier Reef.

The group travelled to John Brewer Reef on Wednesday to help with the collection of data that, once analysed, would provide clues about the ongoing health of coral on the reef.

Reef Check co-ordinator Jos Hill said the aim of the international program, which was developed in 1996, was to train volunteers in all aspects of coral reef monitoring, allowing them to eventually become team leaders.

"It's an incredible opportunity for them because as marine biology students they don't get much of a chance to undertake field work," Ms Hill said.

The selection process was highly competitive, she said. Only students with a Rescue Diver qualification could participate.

The students dived along a 100m by 5m course that had been laid down by the Reef Check co-ordinators, looking for indicators of coral health such as the amount of live coral, recently killed coral, nutrient and algal levels, and evidence of overfishing of invertebrate populations.

"The students will be learning identification skills, but also how to organise and interpret the data," Ms Hill said.

They would also help to compile, enter and analyse the data while gaining management, logistics and teamwork skills.



READY TO DIVE . . . JCU volunteers (from left) Ros Martin, Alison Swaddling, Clave Omodei and Johan Bangtsson head off with Jos Hill to check the reef
Photo: STEWART McLEAN SM333025