



TANGLE . . . divers cleaning fishing line off a section of the Great Barrier Reef

Line of inquiry takes divers to green zones

By DANIEL BATEMAN

VOLUNTEER divers have been gathering a string of evidence to determine if poachers have been causing a serious threat to the Great Barrier Reef.

A team of divers from the Townsville-based arm of Reef Check spent four days on Orpheus and Pelorus islands gathering old fishing lines snagged on coral.

They found hundreds of metres of line, hooks and sinkers in green 'no take' zones around the island, areas closed to fishing since the 1980s.

Reef Check managing director Jos Hill said it was difficult to say whether the

zones had been targeted by poachers, as a majority of the line collected was encrusted on the reef, suggesting it was quite old.

But Ms Hill said the team would continue to gather line at the site to help others draw conclusions.

"If we were to find new line there, next time we go back, then that's information that can be used," she said.

The team also monitored the number and size of coral trout within green and blue zones.

They found significantly more coral trout in the green zones than blue 'general use' zones.

Coral trout in green zones

were also much larger, suggesting zoning was working near Orpheus Island.

"The reason we need protected areas is to maintain areas where they are as pristine as they can be to their natural state, as healthy as they can be," Ms Hill said.

"The tool for increasing the amount of fish all together is having set areas that are closed."

The Reef Check team, working with James Cook University and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, will survey the site every year to find whether more fishing lines have been put down in the zones.

The survey will be

expanded to compare different zones not monitored by researchers.

Reef Check monitors the Great Barrier Reef between the Ribbon Reefs in the north to the Airlie Reefs in the south.

The organisation is helping to build an international database, which will be used by authorities to make better decisions about coral reef management.

Reef Check Australia is always on the lookout for more divers, who must have or train for basic coral reef ecology skills and knowledge, monitoring methods and teamwork.