

Record: 1

Title: Smithsonian field station gets the boot.

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Source: Science; 05/29/98, Vol. 280 Issue 5368, p1340, 2/3p, 1 map, 1 color

Document Type: Article

Subject Terms: TROPICS -- Research
CORAL reef ecology -- Research
SCIENCE & state

Geographic Terms: PANAMA

Abstract: Reports that the San Blas research station in Panama will close July 1, 1998. Reason for the site's closure; Station being a facility of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI); Projects that will end; New monitoring station to open elsewhere; Response of STRI officials; Conducting coral reef ecology studies from boats.

Full Text Word Count: 634

ISSN: 00368075

Accession Number: 668944

Database: Science & Technology Collection
Section: NEWS & COMMENT
CORAL REEF MONITORING

SMITHSONIAN FIELD STATION GETS THE BOOT

After 21 years of hosting studies of Caribbean coral reef ecology on the coast of Panama, the San Blas research station, a satellite facility of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), will close on 1 July. The reason, Smithsonian officials admit, is that they failed to recognize and allay suspicions about the station's activities among local Kuna Indians, who voted last fall to end the institution's \$3000-a-month lease.

A new monitoring station will eventually open some 500 kilometers to the west, but several long-term reef monitoring projects will end, including one that uses San Blas data as a baseline for the entire Caribbean. "This is really a shame. San Blas has become an important reference for many other reef studies in the Caribbean," says reef ecologist Nancy Knowlton, a senior scientist at STRI and a professor at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, California.

The closure took Smithsonian officials by surprise. "We probably didn't do enough preparatory work educating the Kuna people at large about what we do at San Blas," concedes Ira Rubinoff, director of STRI, whose main facility in Panama City and a half-dozen other research stations are not affected. "We had been assured by the Kuna cacique, or chiefs, that [renewal of the lease] was a done deal, so we didn't even go to the Kuna Congress in May 1997 at which the vote was taken."

That may have been the fatal mistake. The Kuna Yala, the 160-kilometer-long autonomous area owned by the Kuna along the Atlantic Coast of Panama near the Colombian border, is run as a well-organized democracy. Although older Indians and those who live near the research station approved the Smithsonian as a good neighbor, younger Kuna and those from farther away were suspicious, says Adrian Cerezo, a Smithsonian anthropologist working at STRI when the Indians

voted on the lease renewal: "There was talk of the station being a military operation, of the scientists harvesting coral to sell, and of evil things going on in the waters where the scientists were working." When the vote came, which is done by murmuring, the nay murmurs were judged louder than the yay murmurs.

STRI officials and the Kuna leadership were stunned. Rubinoff persuaded the Kuna to revisit the lease issue at another Congress in November, and the station embarked on a widespread educational effort. But it was too late, says Rubinoff, who attended this second meeting. Once again, the nays murmured louder.

As a result, scientists will no longer be able to dive from San Blas to inspect corals and associated reef animals, in particular sea urchins. Two decades of study by reef ecologist Harris Lessios, a senior researcher at STRI, has shown that the loss of urchins' algae-scrubbing power has serious consequences for coral, which are then smothered with algae. Monitoring studies of both urchins and other indicators of reef health on the relatively undisturbed San Blas reef have served as a baseline for studies throughout the Caribbean. "That [urchin] study will end, and that's an unfortunate loss," says Rubinoff.

But he notes that other studies can be done, albeit less conveniently, from research boats sent out from STRI's home base. And the Smithsonian plans to set up a new station at a pristine 60,000-square-meter site at Bocas del Toro, at the opposite end of Panama near the Costa Rican border. The Smithsonian has made arrangements with the Panamanian government to buy the site--avoiding any further problems with landlords.

MAP: End of the line. The San Blas research station (top) will close 1 July, and a new site will open at Bocas del Toro next year.

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By Joseph Alper

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