

WEEKEND

Village rallies to save corals



The village of Onna in Okinawa has created this aquaculture facility for raising coral. 12052907

THERE ARE communities that decry the degradation of their environment, and there are those who do something about it.

Pacific journalists who were in Japan to cover the sixth Pacific Islands Leaders' Meeting last week took a tour of an aquaculture facility that's central to a coral regeneration project in the tropical Okinawan village Onna – a community that did something about the state of its coral.

The journalists' interest were palpable and personal, as coral bleaching is a problem with which all Pacific nations have had to contend.

Japan esteems Onnason's coral regeneration project as a model for grassroots community activism, a successful initiative that has fused environmentalists, municipal government and local business in a mission to re-plant the community's corals.

Team Tyura Sango – the implementing arm of the project – was formed in 2004, in response to a global bleaching epidemic that took hold in 1998. The phenomenon bleached over 95 percent of the village's corals, of which there are over 400 species.

The epidemic was spurred by a confluence of factors, not least of which was the global rise in sea temperatures that forced brown zooxanthella out of coral cells, suffocating them in the process. Onna's problem was exacerbated by a history of disorderly land development, which was causing reddish nutrient-rich soil to flow directly into the sea.

Recognising the centrality of coral to the marine ecosystem – that 25 percent of the ocean's life depends directly on coral for sustenance, that corals act as a natural breakwater and a treasury for the ocean's fish resources – the village got together to make a plan.

Team Tyura Sango moved quickly from paper to implementation and the government tightened its building standards, making its waste regulations 10 times stricter than those of the prefectural government.

The Tyura Sango team is responsible for re-planting coral in the Onnason area, using volunteer labour and funding streams from the municipal government and local businesses – both of which have vested interests in preserving the vil-

lage's coral reefs – to make their project possible.

Sponsors – including companies like All Nippon Airways, Yamaha and PADI – contribute about 500 million yen (\$8.2 million) yearly to the project.

But while companies and government contribute funding, most of the project's participants are volunteers. In 2003 an aquaculture facility was built to house the coral planting operation. Corals are raised and harvested in long touch pools, and when they're ready, volunteer Onna villagers fasten the young seedlings on to metal plates.

Four times a year volunteer divers transplant the plates on to reef rocks, covering them with a 35cm plastic caging to protect them in their early stages from crown of thorns and fish.

The Onna Fisheries Cooperative provides boats for the planting events, and designates the most appropriate areas for planting. For the rest of the year the cooperative is responsible for monitoring the seedlings – removing algae, acanthaster and crown of thorns, and recording their growth.

When the corals are 20cm,

they are strong enough to survive and spawn on their own, and the cages are removed.

So far this year 10,000 units have been planted. The survival rate of re-planted coral seedlings is 50 percent, but Onna Fisheries Cooperative expects that technological advances will improve the statistic.

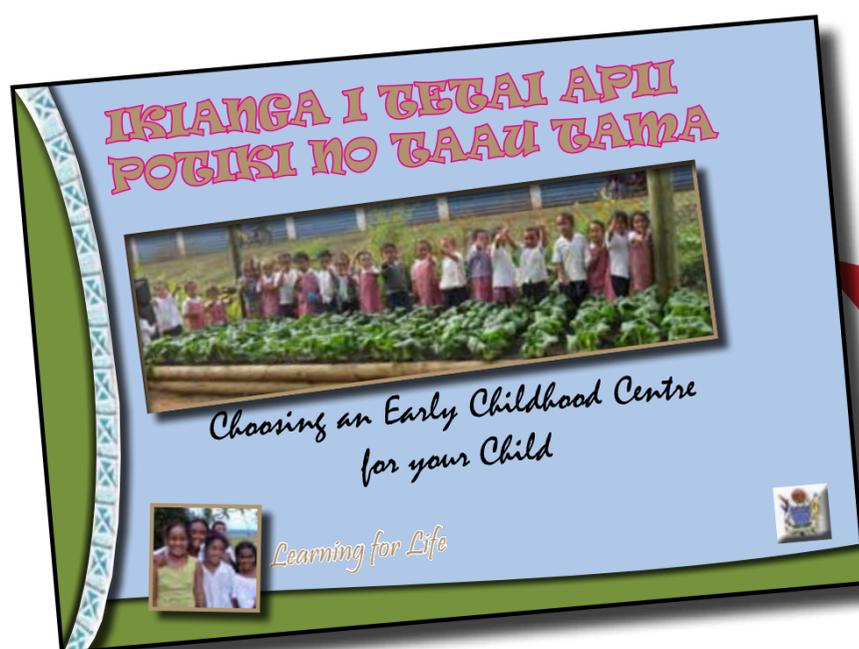
Onnason is running lessons about its coral regeneration project in schools as far away as Tokyo. (Onna is located on Okinawa, an island off the mainland's southern coast.) In an effort to involve all of Japan in its village's grassroots venture, the fisheries cooperative provides plates to school kids in Tokyo, who decorate them before sending them back to Onna to be fastened with coral seedlings.

First ladies, who accompanied their Pacific leaders to last weekend's PALM meeting in Japan, were given a tour of Onnason School and introduced to the coral regeneration programme last week as their husbands deliberated with Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda.

Among them was Prime Minister Henry Puna's wife Akaiti.

■ Rachel Reeves

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