



‘Deep’ cleaning for ghost-net haunted Tiruvottiyur reef

Fishing village declares holiday for clean-up drive; divers from community join exercise

CHENNAI: As part of a community-driven initiative, the Tiruvottiyur fishing village declared a holiday on Friday to collectively clean the artificial reef site near its shore. About 25 fishermen in five boats sailed up to three nautical miles at around 8.20 am, along with two certified divers from Ocean Delight Scuba School in Kovalam, to clean the reef.

The divers *Venkatesh* and *Rahul* who are also from the fishing community, captured stunning visuals of rich marine fish life near the reef. In two separate dives, they spent close to 90 minutes underwater and retrieved multiple ghost nets that trapped hundreds of mackerel fish, most of which were found decomposed.

Artificial reefs or improvised fish aggregation devices (IFAD) were deployed by the State Fisheries Department with the technical assistance of Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI). A total of 6,000 units of artificial reefs weighing approximately 5,250 metric tonnes were deployed in 30 different locations in and around Chennai. A preliminary assessment showed aggregation of juvenile fish in all the sites. However, it is important to periodically monitor and keep the sites free of ghost nets that drift from deep sea and blanket the reefs hampering fish aggregation.

CMFRI scientist Joe K Kizhakudan, who deployed IFADs, told TNIE: “It is important for fishermen themselves to take care of reefs near their shore. It was heartening to see Tiruvottiyur fishing village declaring a holiday and undertaking reef clean-up with the support of community divers. This is a sustainable model needing no help from others.”

Kizhakudan accompanied the fishermen during the clean-up. Venkatesh, one of the divers, told TNIE the reef was in good condition as many species of fish had started to colonize there. Fisherman Lokesh said a whale shark was observed foraging on the reef a few days back.

The stunning underwater visuals showed the presence of several commercial fish varieties like scads, trevallies, perches, barracudas, snappers, groupers, mackerel etc. Good plankton growth was seen on the reef structures. TREE Foundation founder Supraja Dharini, who was invited to take part in the novel initiative, supported the fishermen and divers with an honorarium.

