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Picturesque Dima W'Attayeen shows marvels of nature ● **Pages 8 & 9**

Sonam's balancing act ● **Page 12**

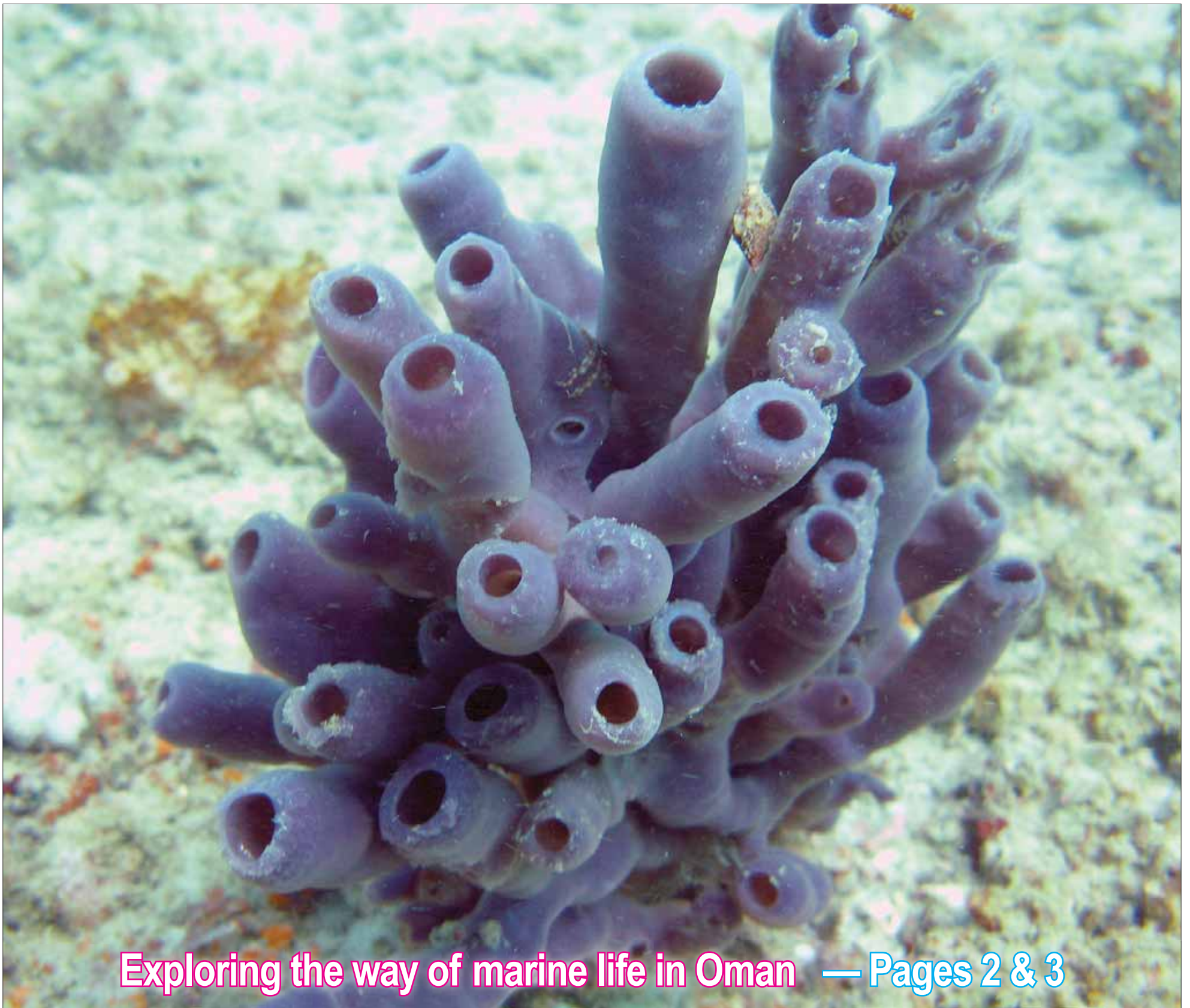


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OMAN دولة DAILY  
**Observer**

Wednesday, July 20, 2011

# Weekend



Exploring the way of marine life in Oman — **Pages 2 & 3**



## Exploring the way of marine life in Oman

*Omani waters have diverse and abundant hexacorals (sea anemones, hard corals, black corals, zooanthids) and octocorals (blue corals, sea fans, soft corals and sea pens) in striking colours*



**T**HE Sea of Oman and Arabian Sea favours greater species diversity for rare varieties of live coral cover and reef associated fauna and flora

says Dr Anita Mary, coral biologist and nature enthusiast. When it comes to plethora of beautiful underwater animals, Oman bestows brilliant underwater gar-

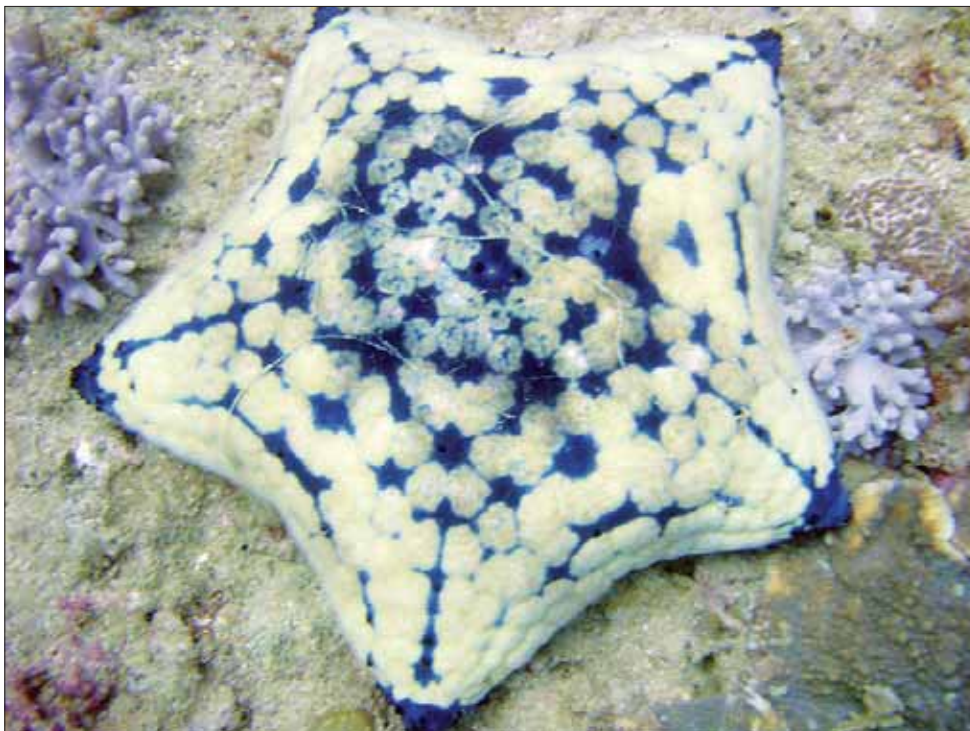
dens for any inquisitive human eyes to enjoy the beauty and appreciate the miracle of nature says Anita. She has been studying corals especially octocorals and sponges for close to fifteen years.

As part of her job Anita has travelled and dived extensively in Asia, Europe and North America to study corals. "As a school student I never imagined corals to be my field of specialisation. I got hooked to it after joining masters' in marine biotechnology. Coral reefs are so irresistible that once you see them live, you realise that they are hidden jewels", says Anita.

Her research gained her a PhD on the taxonomy (naming and classifying animals) of marine sponges. With her expertise, she is considered as an Indian representative for soft coral and sea fan taxonomy in the 7th International Conference on Coelenterate Biology at Kansas, USA.

Corals are very sensitive to rise in water temperature. Hence they play a pivotal role as indicator species. A continuous monitoring of their environment is a prerequisite to understand the impact of climatic changes. Diving to watch corals is no more a recreation activity. Information in bits and pieces pooled together from different locations along the Omani coast will lead us prepare an action plan, says Anita.

Oman waters have diverse and abundant hexacorals (jelly fishes, sea anemones, hard corals, black corals, zooanthids) and octocorals (blue corals, sea fans, soft corals and sea pens)



in striking colours. However the distribution and abundance of a particular group are dependent on several factors such as depth, light penetration, nutrient availability, local fisheries and pollutant loads. There are more than 125 species of hard corals and more than 45 species of octocorals are expected to be confirmed from the Omani waters. This is 12.5 per cent of the Indo-Pacific coral fauna!

Areas such as Bandar Al

Khyran, Yiti, and islands such as Mina al Fahal, Daymaniyat and Al Sawadi are predominant with pristine coral beds. Central and southern coastal zones such as Masirah and Salalah also harbour admirable reefs. They are excellent for invertebrate groups especially sponges, octocorals and hard corals.

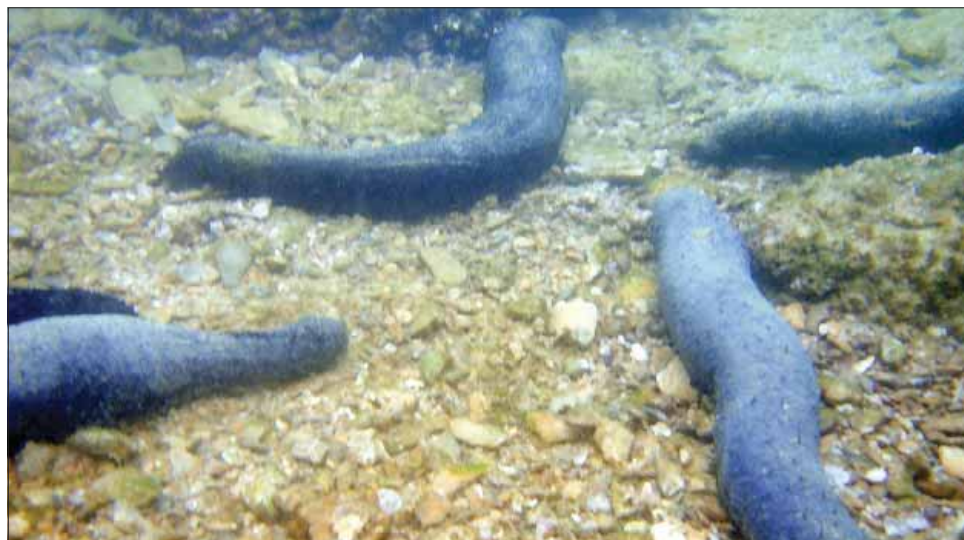
Though there is overlap of distribution, presence or absence of a particular group is of ecological significance. For instance



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certain hard corals species such as Acroporids and Porites are more sensitive to small changes in the environment. If you come across any such species, be proud that you left their habitat with minimum intrusion. Certain other coral species such as Favites and Pocilloporids are capable of withstanding larger fluctuations in their immediate environment. Those species could rapidly expand its territory. Similarly Anita was amazed to see the extensive soft coral bed of species especially Sinularia and Sarcophyton in spite of the suspended sediments and extreme temperatures along the Oman coast. The direct influence



*The extensive soft coral bed of species especially Sinularia and Sarcophyton in spite of the suspended sediments and extreme temperatures along the Oman coast. The direct influence of an annual shift in wind direction and climatic changes at the basin level perhaps favours coral growth and development*

of an annual shift in wind direction and climatic changes at the basin level perhaps favours coral growth and development. Also

the differences during southwest monsoon (May-September) when strong south-westerly winds blow along the coastline of Dhofar, generate rapid polar-wise upwelling while northeast monsoon brings cool conditions.

with is to document the available species and bring out a pictorial hand guide for recreational divers/students and any sea lov-

Her commitment towards conservation of coral reefs knows no geographic boundaries. She says, "The problem of coral bleaching is obvious. We can no more afford to connive at it". Anita wishes to introduce the locals to appreciate the role of both hard and soft corals in maintaining the health of Omani waters. After two years of crisscrossing between coasts in Oman and more than 55 hours of diving reefs and no reef zone areas, she is confident that coral monitoring and creating artificial reefs are few of the cost effective approaches to protect the Omani waters.

Anita has definite plans for conserving the promising field of coral reefs in Oman. She quotes that the primary activity to start

ers. Secondly she plans to train the locals by conducting workshop to scientifically record and photograph corals during their recreational dives. She plans for corals and fish culture in an experimental way to develop an informative marine reef aquarium and museum to educate and entertain the public. A centralised data storage facility should be established for authentication, archiving and sharing of information, she stressed.

All that is needed is funds to keep her gumption and dive intact! Any helping hands?

*(Dr Anita is currently working as a marine scientist in HMR Consultants, Muscat. She can be reached by e-mail: [marineani@rediffmail.com](mailto:marineani@rediffmail.com))*

— Pictures by Dr Anita Mary

