

Scientists at UCIMR replenishing kelp beds

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Diver scientists at The University of California's Institute of Marine Resources in La Jolla are giving Nature a helping hand in replenishing southern California's kelp beds, decimated by three years of warm water.

They are bringing from Baja California a strain of the kelp that resists higher water temperatures than does the local variety.

Wheeler J. North, biologist who heads the Institute's Kelp Investigations Program, emphasizes that his group is not engaged in an undersea reforestation program. "We are putting out a few plants," he said, "in the hope that if the water continues to be warm, the spores will take hold and grow. Each plant produces about 70 trillion spores a year. During periods of warm water a lot of these float up to California from the southern kelp beds. If the warm water lasts long enough, the southern strain would probably supplant the local kelp, anyhow. We just hope to hasten the process and also to have this new variety available for study close at hand."

The divers loosen mature kelp plants from the rocks to which they are attached. They keep them moist on the return trip to San Diego. To transplant them they use nylon cord to tie the bulky kelp holdfasts to rocks off San Diego. Within a month, the holdfast has attached itself securely to its new habitation. North transplanted the first specimen off La Jolla several months ago. It took hold and thrived until it was broken off by a severe storm that also wiped about almost the last of the La Jolla kelp bed. So far, few specimens have been transplanted.

The local kelp beds are near extinction, North says. "South of Los Angeles there is only about a tenth as much kelp as there was ten years ago. Our observations show that the kelp is badly damaged by warm water."