

Coral bleaching ‘strong proof’ for climate change skeptics

A student at the University of Indonesia, Claudia Van Nasution, felt like she was underwater when scientists showed photos of beautiful coral on slides at a presentation. Her profile changed when slides depicted coral bleaching, which scientists said was caused by human-induced climate change. “I am sad to see photos of coral bleaching. It makes me more confident about fighting climate change,” Claudia told The Jakarta Post on the sidelines of an international youth forum on the climate change held in Jakarta on Thursday.

Another participant, Atika Putri Astrini from Padjajaran University, said that she had only just realized the severe impacts of climate change on the marine ecosystem after attending the conference. “I’ve been presented with new facts to ensure me that climate change is happening. I rarely get information on how climate change relates to the ocean.” The students are two of 275 youth from 25 countries attending the conference. The conference with the theme “listen to us and sense our worries” was jointly organized by the National Youth Committee of Indonesia (KNPI) and World Assembly Youth with the Indonesian government.

The participants will also partake in field trips to Kappopposan Island in South Sulawesi to learn about the sea and coral reefs, Tanjung Putting in Central Kalimantan to explore issues of forest and Komodo Island in East Nusa Tenggara. The output of the conference, namely “The Jakarta Youth Declaration”, is to be handed over to House of Representative speaker Marzuki Ali on Monday. Expert from Hasanuddin University, Jamaluddin Jompa, said that Indonesia suffered massive coral bleaching with many of the coral dead in the last two years.

“The death of coral is believed to be accelerated by the climate change with the increase of sea temperature,” he told the Post. His 2010 research showed that about 10 percent of coral both in South Sulawesi and Central Sulawesi suffered from bleaching but parts could still be recovered. Jamaluddin, who is also chairman of the Indonesian Young Scientists, said that the coral damage could threaten food security in Indonesia.

Andreas Hutahaean, coordinator of the research program on coastal-marine CO₂ variability at the Maritime and Fisheries Affairs Ministry, said that the rise of Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) dissolving in ocean would increase acid-levels in the ocean. “It would then impact on the growth of marine organisms,” he said. He said that it was predicted that coral reefs would be extinct by 2060 as the concentration of carbon emissions absorbed in seawater continued to rise.

“The decline of coral reefs from the marine ecosystem could have significant ecological and economic impacts on about 500 million people directly dependent on healthy coral reefs for food, coastal protection, building materials and tourism,” he said. A global report by 25 organizations, including the World Resource Institute, the Nature Conservancy and International Coral Reef Action Network, said that 75 percent of the world’s coral reefs were under threat.

The “Reef at Risk” report released Thursday said that the threats of climate change included warming seas and increasing ocean acidification.

The report shows local pressures, such as overfishing, coastal development and pollution, posed the most immediate and direct risks, threaten more than 60 percent of coral reefs today. “This is about the people as well as nature,” Mark Spalding, a senior marine scientist at The Nature Conservancy, said.

According to the new analysis, if left unchecked, the percent of threatened reefs will rise to more than 90 percent by 2030 and to nearly all reefs by 2050.