



DEADLY . . . David Windsor watches some of the crown of thorns starfish taken from John Brewer Reef and now on display at Reef HQ

Photo: LORI NEILSEN LN075B10

Starfish causes reef grief

By **KAREN INGRAM**

THE bane of the Great Barrier Reef, the crown of thorns starfish, has made a staggering comeback, according to a Townsville reef research centre.

Divers have removed more than 4000 of the deadly, coral-eating starfish from John Brewer Reef in just six days, suggesting the current outbreak is even more severe than one 10 years ago that destroyed a significant portion of the reef.

David Windsor, managing director of the Great Barrier Reef Research Foundation, said the density was such that the creatures were crawling over each other to get to the coral.

Scientists have been at odds about what sparks the plague

proportions. Mr Windsor said one theory suggested large outflows of fresh water encouraged the species to flourish, as the crown of thorns starfish was one of the few marine creatures that could live in low salinity water.

Another theory suggested changes in the amount of suspended nutrients in the water could affect the lifespan of post-larval starfish, which are about the size of a 10-cent piece and live on nutrients and algae in the water rather than coral.

One starfish could release up to 700,000 larvae in a single spawning and a minimal change in nutrient levels could cause an outbreak.

The current program to kill the deadly starfish, administered by the research foundation, has been provided with

\$1.5 million funding, jointly granted by the federal and State governments.

Association of Marine Park Tourism Operators chairman David Hutchen said tourism operators would be required to maintain their sites once they had been cleared of starfish.

He said a dozen or so reef tourism operators had contributed more than \$2 million over 18 months to combat the problem, and would continue to send divers down regularly to inject the starfish with a compound that would kill them within 24 hours.

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority chairwoman Virginia Chadwick said the cost of the project was easily justified in light of the potential losses to the tourism industry and damage to the reef.