A Thousand Points of Pain: Fire Coral

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(Note to self: For future reference, organisms that are commonly named fire- this or fire- that or fire- anything, you probably should avoid touching. Please.) How many times after making a less than perfect dive in the ocean have you recorded a similar message in your own mind? Well, you're not alone.

Members of the phylum Cnidaria, fire corals are Hydrozoans, more closely related to the dreaded Portuguese Man O' War than to the Anthozoan corals, like brain coral and star coral, that we have discussed previously. Found in all of the world's oceans, fire corals appear in several different forms: branching that stands alone like small trees, encrusting that grows over other corals or hard surfaces, and blade that looks a lot like lettuce coral. The color of fire coral can run from a light tan to a more golden brown, though many textbooks describe it as having a "mustardy" color.

Most divers don't consider fire corals to be among the more attractive components of a coral reef. However, especially in unspoiled, seldom visited areas like the east side of Cozumel, you can find many large, beautiful examples fire coral. On Ha Nam reef, for instance, there are specimens of branching fire coral several feet tall and wide. These delicate looking structures often serve as a safe habitat for brittle starfish, providing interesting opportunities for underwater photographers.

Fire corals belong to genus Millepora, meaning "thousand holes". This aptly describes the appearance of the fire corals' surface, which is very smooth and perforated by many small pores. Close inspection reveals that from these pores extend tiny hairlike extensions; they are actually polyps bearing the stinging nematocysts, as well as smaller feeding polyps.

If you happen to be among those unlucky ones who have carelessly bumped an elbow or knee into a piece of fire coral, then you know very well how it got it's common name. "Like being stuck with a hot needle" is the way many divers describe the acutely painful sensation. While there are several good sting-stopping treatments commercially available from dive shops and pharmacies, they are all designed for you to use after you get out of the water. Many old-timers who prefer not to wait for post-dive relief still rely on the slimy mucous secretions of brain- or star-coral to provide an immediate remedy. Though not exactly politically correct in these ecologically sensitive times, this long-used method, passed down through diving generations, is apparently quite effective. Other remedies, which are a lot less likely to raise the hackles of resort divemasters, include the application of vinegar or of a meat tenderizer containing the enzyme papain.

Of course, the best remedy for fire coral stings is to just make sure that you don't get stung. To quote The Boss, "you can look, but you'd better not touch." And to accomplish that you just have to develop good buoyancy control skills. When you hover safely above the reef, you don't risk coming into contact with the batteries of stinging cells, and first aid becomes unnecessary. In fact, just the threat (and, in some cases, the memory) of fire coral stings has given many divers all of the extra incentive they needed to become better divers. Aversion therapy works, even underwater.

References:
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