

## Tracking the stingers

# Israel launches JellyWatch to monitor jellyfish swarms

By Zafrir Rinat

The Israel Oceanographic and Limnological Research institute is launching a project to monitor the jellyfish swarms that have recently invaded Israel's shores.

IOLR staff intend to visit beaches today and distribute posters detailing common species of the stinging, gelatinous marine animals to beach managers, fishermen, diving club members, boat owners and private individuals.

They will ask them to report sightings of jellyfish and similar marine animals to the Haifa-based institute.

Dubbed JellyWatch, the project was initiated by the International Commission for the Scientific Exploration of the Mediterranean Sea, after scientists from all Mediterranean states concluded that the region was suffering an outbreak of jellyfish population. The jellyfish outbreak is severely damaging commercial fish and other marine animals' populations, with which they compete for plankton and food.

"The jellyfish used to appear in a kind of natural cycle," says the IOLR's Prof.



Seen this stinger? Drop us a line and tell us where.

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Bella Galil. "However, in recent years they have been appearing more frequently and in greater numbers and have been causing damage."

The native Mediterranean jellyfish have recently been joined by several species that invaded the area from elsewhere, such as the Rhopilema, which drifted to the Mediterranean from the Red Sea via the Suez Canal. The warty comb jelly (Mnemiopsis), one of the world's most

invasive and dangerous species, has recently been spotted off Israel's shores.

Jellyfish stings have been reported in most Mediterranean countries, including Israel. Three years ago more than 30,000 people required medical treatment after being stung by the Pelagia jellyfish in Spain's popular beaches, such as Costa del Sol.

The French Riviera's rescue services received hundreds of calls last year to tend to jellyfish stings. Similar cases were reported on Italy and Sardinia's shores. The authorities in Monaco, alarmed by the jellyfish's effect on tourists, spread nets to catch them in the sea. However, the sheer size of the swarms rendered the nets ineffective.

In addition to stinging bathers, the jellyfish clog up desalination facilities and power stations on the beach and flood fishermen's nets, says Galil.

"Their profusion is an alarming sign that the Mediterranean Sea is undergoing a big change," she says. Scientists believe this profusion is related to global warming and environmental pollution, which create convenient conditions for the jellyfish's expansion.

People taking part in the project will be asked to report their sightings to IOLR scientists, using the species' description on the posters. The scientists will try to verify the reports and form a fuller picture of the jellyfish species' distribution and density throughout the sea.