

REEF CHECK



WORLDWIDE

Reef Check Foundation

annual report 2009

Saving Reefs Worldwide

Reef Check Foundation

Founded in 1997, Reef Check is a non-profit organization dedicated to marine conservation, especially tropical coral reefs and California's rocky reef ecosystems.

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Dominican Republic
Germany
Indonesia
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Hawai'i
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Photo: Howard Hall



Photo: Nick Seth Smith

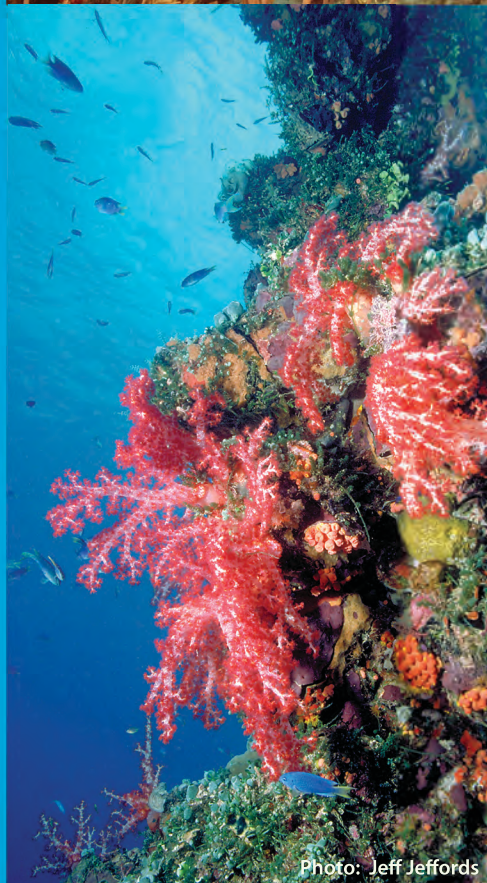


Photo: Jeff Jeffords

Director's Message

Do you remember back in the 1990s when we were all wondering how we would pronounce the years after 1999? And now we have just completed our first decade of the new millennium. How are coral reefs and California rocky reefs doing? How is Reef Check helping?

Despite the financial chaos this year, the continuing support of thousands of volunteers from around the world allowed Reef Check to maintain its staff and programs, and carry out over 500 coral reef surveys and 70 rocky reef surveys in California. The tropical data are being used by independent scientists to analyze and publish peer-reviewed papers in top scientific journals - leading to new insights in the science of coral reef ecology such as the role of algae in destabilizing reef systems. At the local level, the data are used by government managers to track the status of their reefs. More and more governments are finally realizing how difficult it is to fund detailed ecological monitoring by pure scientific teams every year. Countries such as Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean and Vanuatu in the Pacific are using community-based monitoring as a primary tool to track the status of their reefs. At the international level, Reef Check data are being used to push for more action on coral reef conservation using tools such as the Global Status Report series.

Cover Photo: Coral Reef Adventure, MacGillivray Freeman Films
Back Cover Photos: Background - Rob Clayton; From Left - Gregor Hodgson, Gregor Hodgson, Coral Reef Adventure, MacGillivray Freeman Films
Graphic Design: Daniele Nance (nancenet.com); Neil Hao

highlights

of 2009

Photo: Nick Seth-Smith



Climate change, global warming and ocean acidification were in the news in 2009. Coral reefs are THE most sensitive ecosystem to climate change. We found this out in 1997-8 when an overheated ocean killed 10% of the world's reefs in a few months. Some scientists predict that coral reefs will be completely killed off within 50 years if global warming continues. Many countries and local managers recognize that Reef Check monitoring provides a great way to track climate change impacts on coral reefs. In addition, the EcoDiver certification program not only produces high-quality data, but also is an ecotourism opportunity that provides both jobs and income to coastal residents.

In California, under the mandate of the Marine Life Protection Act, the state is in the midst of designing a network for Marine Protected Areas. The high quality data from Reef Check's California surveys are available to the general public, and are being used on a regular basis by government agencies, especially the Fish and Game Department, by academics, fishermen and other

non-profit organizations to help determine the best design. With four years of data in the bag, the California program is poised to be able to track future effects of the MPA network on the populations of key fish, algae and invertebrates.

Reef Check's partnership with Comunidad y Biodiversidad in Baja, Mexico continues to produce successful marine management results. On the Gulf of California side, we have helped to develop the stock assessment program for the sustainable aquarium fishery while on the Pacific side, we have been assisting with the monitoring program for a sustainable food fishery for abalone, lobster and sea cucumber.

Reef Check's immersion learning programs for children continue to educate hundreds of kids. It is a sad irony that so many children in small island developing countries as well as in large American coastal cities such as Los Angeles have never had the chance to put on a mask and snorkel and see our underwater treasures. With your help we hope to expand our kids programs in 2010.

Reef Check is a partnership organization focused on citizen science. We could not do this work without the thousands who volunteer each year to learn and carry out surveys. We salute our 2009 partners and volunteers for all the wonderful accomplishments of 2009.



Photo: RC Belize

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gregor Hodgson".

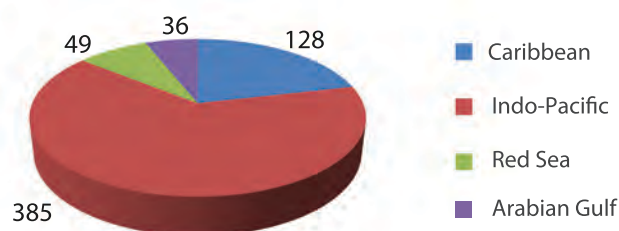
Gregor Hodgson, PhD
Executive Director

Photo: Coral Reef Adventure/MacGillivray Freeman Films

Global Status of Reefs

Photo: Sue Chen

2009 Reef Check Surveys by Region (Tropical)



Location of Reef Check surveys in 2009



“The results of Reef Check surveys are an important contribution to the scientific assessment of the world’s coral reefs and the search for solutions to the crisis threatening them.”

Dr. Terry Done
Australian Institute of
Marine Science

Reef Check Data Featured in Science Journal *Ecology*

For a variety of reasons including ocean warming, destructive fishing and predator and disease outbreaks, coral abundance on reefs around the world began to decline several decades ago. In some locations, the cover and biomass of benthic macroalgae increased concurrently with coral loss, resulting in community phase shifts to reefs dominated by macroalgae. This was seen clearly on several Jamaican reefs in the 1980s and the same trend was assumed to be applicable to reefs worldwide. While there have been several reports of such phase shifts on other individual reefs, there have been no analyses for such shifts on a global scale. To assess the degree of such a phase shift on a global level, scientists made good use of the Reef Check dataset which provided more than half of the surveys used in the study. The paper, which was published in the June 2009 issue of *Ecology*, concluded that fewer reefs than expected are dominated by algae.

California Program

Even in these challenging economic times, Reef Check’s California Program (RCCA) continues to have incredible successes with tangible results thanks to our hundreds of volunteer citizen scientists and partners. This year was the most successful to date; we trained 201 divers and completed 75 surveys at 61 sites ranging from Humboldt to San Diego counties. We completed our fourth year of data collection and since the beginning of surveys in 2006 we have counted 114,624 fishes, 282,333 invertebrates, and 92,765 seaweeds. Our divers have taken direct action to improve marine management in California and with the completion of our Nearshore Ecosystem Database (NED, ned.reefcheck.org) all the data they have collected are publically available. This has led to our data being used by the MLPA Initiative, the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) and academic researchers throughout the state. As the program matures, the applications for our data continue to increase as well as our ability to assist the state in the collection of data that can be used to inform marine management decisions. In the future we are going to be actively involved in the baseline monitoring of the regional networks of MPAs mandated by the Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) and continue to provide data to DFG to implement the Marine Life Management Act.

RCCA and the MLPA

California's nearshore rocky reefs have been a hot topic in 2009 with the continued implementation of the Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA). The MLPA passed in 1999, directed the state to develop an improved network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) throughout California. This process continues currently using a regional approach with new networks already in place on the central coast, implementation pending on the north-central coast, and a final decision being made on the south coast soon. This process involves Regional Stakeholder Groups made up of a wide variety of interests with the advice of a Science Advisor Team developing a range of regional plans. These plans are then forwarded to a Blue Ribbon Task Force which forwards a preferred alternative to the Fish and Game Commission which makes the final decision.

This management process is tailor made for what RC's California Program does; we collect high quality scientific data that can be used to better inform management decisions. Our data are available to all interested parties through our NED database. The types of data our citizen scientists collect help us to understand the status and trends of key indicator species throughout the state. This information can be used to help stakeholders develop plans for new MPAs and marine managers to assess the status of populations of our living marine resources such as lobster and rockfishes. Our data were said to have "measurably impacted the process" by providing stakeholders, which ranged from commercial fishermen to marine conservation groups, with high quality scientific data to help inform their decisions. Reef Check California is poised to become an active participant in the monitoring and evaluation of these MPA networks as the state begins funding the mandated evaluation and adaptive management.

PERSGA Releases Status Report on Red Sea and Gulf of Aden

The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (RSGA) are globally distinguished by their great diversity of marine environments, the number of unique species, and the importance of marine resources to the social and economic development of the region. This region, however, has experienced rapid coastal development in the past four decades. This has been followed, in some places, by degradation of the marine and coastal environments and loss of their potential to sustain the livelihoods of coastal populations. The nations of the region have acted to conserve these environments, and PERSGA was established to organize regional activities, initiatives, and efforts for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

PERSGA participated with member countries in two regional surveys of coral reef ecosystems, the first during 2002 and the second during 2008. Their status report, to be published in February 2010, presents data from the 2008 survey in which 36 sites were surveyed in Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen using the Reef Check survey protocol. This data was compared to that collected during the regional survey of 52 sites in 2002.

The key findings of the analysis for the whole RSGA region are as follows:

Butterflyfish, indicators of the ornamental fish trade and overfishing, showed a slightly increased mean abundance in 2008 over 2002. These abundance levels however, were found to be lower than those recorded for the Indo-Pacific region as a whole during 1997-2001.

Sweetlips (Haemulidae), used as an indicator for line-fishing and spear-fishing, showed similar abundances in the 2008 and 2002 surveys. These abundances were found to be higher than those recorded for the Indo-Pacific region during 1997-2001.

Grouper (greater than 30 cm), indicators for overfishing by line-fishing and spear-fishing close to reef areas, showed that mean abundances slightly decreased in 2008 compared to 2002. However these levels were

higher than the recorded abundances for the whole Indo-Pacific region during 1997-2001, but lower than those recorded for the Red Sea in the same period.

Snapper, an indicator for overfishing by nets close to reefs, showed a sharp decrease in mean abundance in the 2008 surveys compared to 2002. These abundance levels were still much higher than the abundances recorded for the whole Indo-Pacific region in 1997-2001.

Parrotfish, an indicator for overfishing and controlling algal growth over coral reefs, had similar mean abundances in 2008 and 2002. Similar abundance was recorded for the whole Indo-Pacific region in the 1997-2001 surveys.

Lobsters, an indicator for overfishing through direct collection from reefs, were not found at 94% of sites during either the 2008 or 2002 surveys, indicating severe overfishing. Absence of lobster records in 90% of the sites was recorded for the whole Indo-Pacific region during 1997-2001 surveys.

Long-spined sea urchins, *Diadema*, an indicator of problems with reef health if in high abundance, showed a decrease in mean abundance in 2008 from 2002. Higher abundance was recorded for the whole Indo-Pacific region in 2000 than in RSGA during 2008.

Triton gastropods, an indicator of curio collection, were not found at about 90% of sites during either the 2008 or 2002 surveys, indicating severe collection of this shell. A similar situation was recorded for the whole Indo-Pacific region during 1997-2001.

Giant clams, indicators for collection as food, curio, and ornamental shellfish, were recorded at about 70% of the surveyed sites during 2002 and 2008. The recorded shells were <20 cm in length, which are difficult sizes for collection. Higher abundances were recorded for the whole Indo-Pacific region in the 1997-2001 period.

education

“Reef Check has created a global coral reef monitoring program using a mixture of scientists and recreational divers that is providing coral reef managers in many countries with important and timely data.”

Professor Richard Kenchington
Chair of the Board of the International Coral Reef Action Network

EcoExpeditions

Reef Check's EcoExpeditions offer divers the chance to visit some of the world's foremost diving destinations and also gives them the opportunity to help conserve marine resources in those regions. All participants become Reef Check certified EcoDivers and conduct surveys as part of their holiday experience.

In 2009, the Reef Check EcoDiver Program went to several exciting and exotic destinations. Below is a list of a few of the EcoExpeditions that were run in 2009.

Egyptian Red Sea Safari

In May, 11 divers and 2 Reef Check scientists boarded Sinai Divers' Ghazala I to survey coral reefs around the southern part of the Sinai peninsula. The safari, in its sixth year of operation, compared reefs considered “Hot Spots” (dive sites with more than 5 to 10 diving boats a day), to relatively unused dive sites.

Sea|mester

In August, Reef Check once again teamed up with the Sea|mester study abroad program to teach their students the Reef Check survey protocol. The crew of S/Y Argo, with the help of Reef Check Malaysia, conducted Reef Check surveys around Pulau Tioman, Malaysia. Sea|mester also has a similar expedition each

year to St Lucia in which students participate in annual Reef Check monitoring.

Isla Natividad, Mexico

Reef Check teamed up with the fishing Cooperativa Buzos y Pescadores and the Mexico-based environmental group Comunidad y Biodiversidad (COBI), to run the first recreational dive trip to Isla Natividad in Fall 2009. The trip is part of a project to use non-fishing activities to earn income for the fishing Cooperativa and pay part of the cost of operating the two marine reserves located there.

Biosphere Expeditions

Biosphere Expeditions is a non-profit organization that organizes conservation based expeditions that link up scientists and conservationists with recreational divers. They have been a Reef Check partner since 2006 and offered two EcoExpeditions in 2009:

Oman:

In October, the inaugural EcoExpeditions to Oman were successfully completed. The goal of the trips was to examine reef health and the effects of human activity on the Musandam peninsula. Twenty-three divers were certified as Reef Check EcoDivers. The EcoExpeditions paved the way for additional EcoDiver trainings and monitoring sessions in Musandam in 2010.



Photo: Biosphere Expeditions

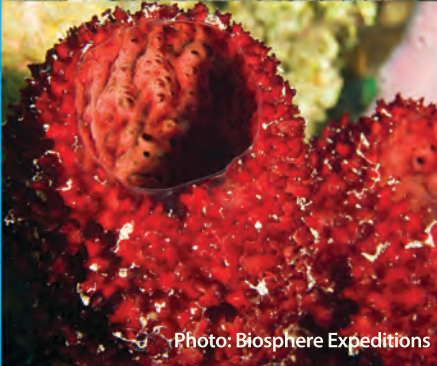


Photo: Biosphere Expeditions



Photo: Biosphere Expeditions

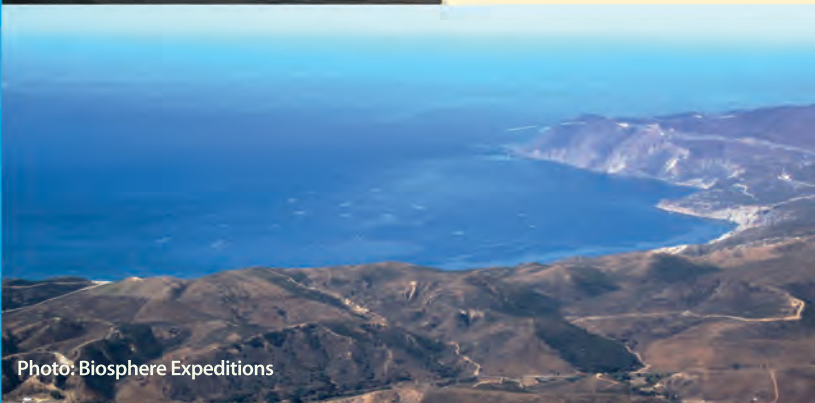


Photo: Biosphere Expeditions



Photo: Seamester



Photo: RC Australia



Photo: Sue Chen

Honduras:

Biosphere Expeditions, in conjunction with the Honduras Coral Reef Fund, conducted surveys in Cayos Cochinos Marine Biological Reserve off the coast of Honduras, part of the world's second largest reef system, as part of the 4th year of EcoExpeditions to the region. The purpose of the survey program is to provide data on the current biological status of the reefs and of population levels of protected species within the marine protected area. The data will be used to make informed management and conservation decisions within the existing marine protected area.

EcoDiver Program

Since its launch in 2006, Reef Check's EcoDiver program has continued to grow at a rapid pace. The EcoDiver Certification program has attracted a wide variety of participants, from fishermen to businessmen to fellow conservationists. Over the course of the past year Reef Check has certified 85 EcoDiver Trainers from 17 countries. The certified Trainers, in turn, have certified 295 EcoDivers in 19 countries, creating a vast new suite of volunteer surveyors to help monitor the health of the world's coral reefs.

These trainings included 6 Pro Dive International personnel in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, thus making the dive resort the first Reef Check training facility on the U.S. East coast. 2009 also saw the first EcoDiver

training in London as a result of an expanded partnership agreement between Reef Check and Coral Cay Conservation. Coral Cay Conservation is one of the largest expedition companies in the UK, and over the last two decades have had thousands of divers volunteering on projects around the world. In 2009, they offered the EcoDiver certification to volunteers running projects in the Philippines, Cambodia, and Tobago.

In September, Executive Director Gregor Hodgson trained seven members of the Tobago Cays Marine Park staff and the Coast Guard from St. Vincent and the Grenadines. An extra day was spent designing a monitoring plan for the park that could be carried out every year.

Also in September, 4 EcoDiver Trainers and 2 Course Directors were trained up in St Maarten in a training organized by the St. Maarten Nature Foundation, the dive

shop Ocean Explorers and the Dutch Caribbean Nature Alliance. Participants included representatives from the fellow Caribbean islands of Bonaire and Curacao resulting in all 3 islands having certified Reef Check EcoDiver Trainers. The training also discussed the most appropriate reef sites for a regular monitoring program in St. Maarten.

Other trainings included a May workshop in Tobago in which the Buccoo Reef Trust and the Tobago Fisheries Department hosted 20 participants from dive shops, non-profits, and government agencies for a Reef Check EcoDiver Training of Trainers course. By training's end, 15 participants were certified as EcoDiver Trainers and an island-wide monitoring plan was drafted. In July, 5 biologists from the Keto Foundation were trained as the first Reef Check EcoDiver Trainers in Costa Rica. This is the first stage within the Foundation's project to establish a monitoring network of coral reefs with community volunteers led by trained scientists.



Photo: RC Tobago

conservation



Photo: Howard Hall

Dominican Republic and Lobster Populations

Reef Check Dominican Republic (RCDR) was awarded USD\$ 21,428.57 in 2009 from the Programa de Pequeños Subsidios (PPS/FMAM/PNUD) in order to reestablish lobster populations inside the La Caleta marine reserve. The project includes transplanting lobster to artificial reefs in order to reduce fishing pressure on coral reefs. The Project also involves an educational campaign for fishermen to ensure long term success. Shifting to a more sustainable fishing method will be achieved by conducting workshops on coral reefs, marine protected areas, and sustainable fishing, as well as marine biodiversity inside the marine park of La Caleta. To increase the lobster population inside the reserve and to direct the benefit to adjacent fishing communities, RCDR will fortify the cooperative structure and establish a system of registration and catch control.

At La Caleta National Marine Park, RCDR works very closely with the government through the Environment and Natural Resources Secretariat through an agreement to manage the MPA more effectively. Workshops and meetings will be used to expose the community to modern concepts of the management of MPAs, and then define geographic limits for better control and regulation, along with better regulation of diving activities in the area. A

monitoring program on reef health has been in place for two years with the goal of determining the effectiveness of the management actions that are being implemented.

Natividad

Reef Check (RC) partnered with the organization Comunidad y Biodiversidad (COBI) and the fishing Cooperative of Natividad in 2006 to design a monitoring program for the island's marine reserves. Reef Check's partnership with COBI in Baja, Mexico continues to produce successful marine management results. On the Gulf of California side, we have helped to develop the stock assessment program for the sustainable aquarium fishery while on the Pacific side, we have been assisting with the monitoring program for a sustainable food fishery for abalone, lobster, sea cucumber and wavy top snail.



Photo: Nick Seth-Smith



Photo: Sue Chen



Photo: Nick Seth-Smith



In the Gulf of California and with the assistance of COBI, Cooperativa Mujeres del Golfo (CMG) continued to monitor their reserve and fishing sites using a monitoring protocol specific to the aquarium fishery in this area. This protocol is based on the RC California protocol and the Marine Aquarium Trade Coral Reef Monitoring Protocol (MAQTRAC). MAQTRAC, developed by Gregor Hodgson and Domingo Ochavillo, consists of guides for field collection and analysis of data to obtain the total allowable catch per species. Throughout the year COBI and RC also worked with industry operators to produce a Manual of Best Practices that describes straightforward procedures to lower mortality and increase longevity of traded species along the delivery chain. A label for best practices, cost effective for all users including fishers, is also being explored under which applicable species can be traded and clearly identified by consumers.

In the Mexican Northern Pacific RC retrained a group of cooperative divers and COBI scientists to continue the annual monitoring of the island's two marine reserves. The Natividad protocol, like California's, contains a list of fishes, invertebrates and algae to be identified and counted; as well as ocean floor sampling referred to as Uniform Point Contact.

Reef Check also became involved in exploring new activities that can be undertaken to cover part of the opportunity cost of no fishing in the marine reserves and further decrease fishing pressure on threatened species. The first of such activities is working with the cooperative to bring to the island a limited number of recreational divers per year; and to complement this activity with others such as bird watching and surfing. In November we successfully completed the first recreational dive expedition to Natividad. Future RC undertakings include estimating the recreational carrying capacity of the island and producing a tourism management plan.

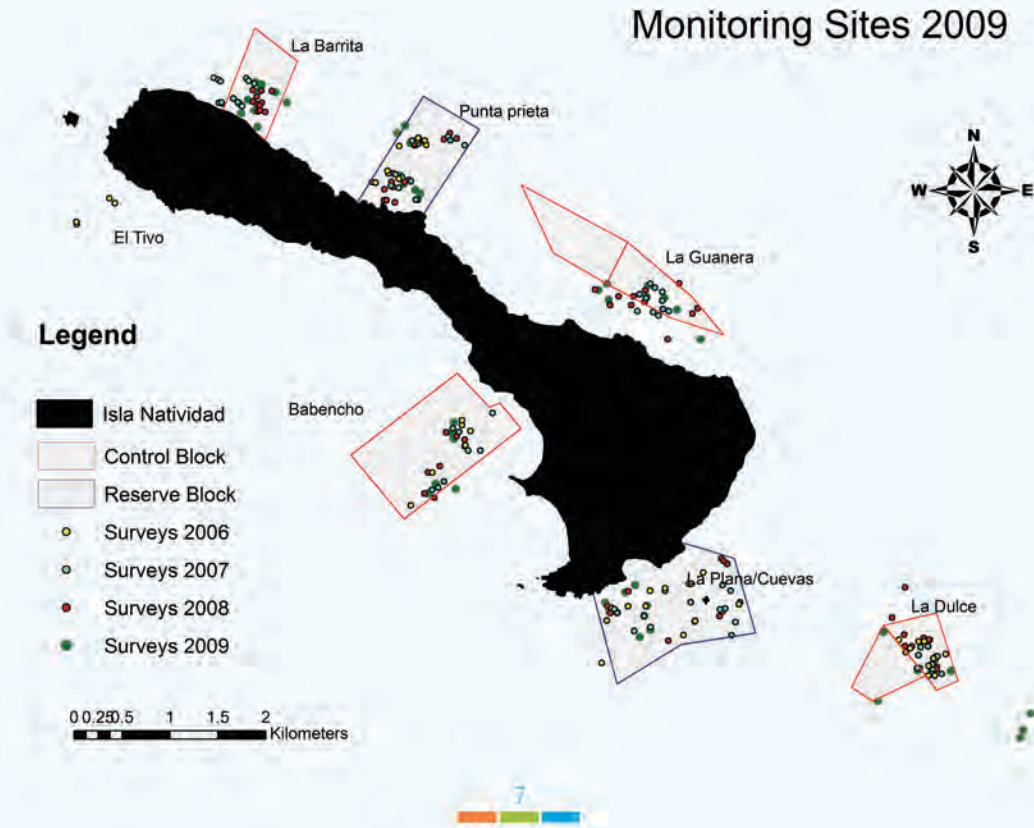


Photo : Mary Luna

public awareness



Photo: RC Thailand



Photo: RC Tobago

IYOR Singing Contest

Reef Check concluded the International Year of the Reef 2008 with a Singing Contest. Using the "Year of the Reef" song, the contest was a big success with nine groups of kids from around the world expressing their culture and passion for reef conservation through music. Thanks to the generous support of Body Glove, along with ReefLab, each group received a cash prize:

1st place (\$1000)

Trinidad and Tobago

2nd place (\$600)

Netherlands Antilles

3rd place (\$400)

Comoros, India, Dominican Republic and Taiwan

Honorable mention (\$400)

American Samoa, Egypt and Colombia

Reef Check Executive Director Dr. Gregor Hodgson, along with Tobago's Honorable Chief Secretary MacFarlane and TV news crews, showed up for the handover ceremony in Tobago to present the winning group of kids their prize.

Malibu Rum Partnership

The Malibu/Reef Check partnership launched in June, when seven U.S. journalists got their feet wet and more on a Reef Check expedition to the "Center of the Center" of global marine biodiversity – the Philippines. As the first step in a dynamic partnership with Malibu®, the journalists were trained in the standard EcoDiver monitoring protocol and then thrown in the deep end – literally – on the reefs of Puerto Galera, about three hours south of Manila. The trip garnered publicity for the kick off of Malibu's ultimate beach internship, where applicants from across the United States and from all walks of life applied for the opportunity to become a Reef Check Intern in Phuket, Thailand. After a rigorous screening, ten interns were selected to participate in a 10 day training and survey EcoExpedition, organized by RC Thailand Coordinators Kim Obermeyer and Awe, and sponsored by Malibu. The interns came from all over the US – from New York to Chicago to San Diego. Several had never tried to snorkel before, but had always wanted to learn more about the ocean. Others were avid scuba divers who were interested in learning more about coral reef conservation.

For those who couldn't intern, Malibu brought the party home by introducing a limited-edition Reef Check-inspired bottle with a charitable contribution made to Reef Check on behalf of the brand.

Party for the Planet

In April, Reef Check once again partnered with Shark Reef Aquarium at Mandalay Bay to support the third annual Party for the Planet in Las Vegas. Reef Check staff and volunteers were present to engage the public in monitoring methodology. A transect line and underwater pictures of RC's indicator species were laid out on the floor allowing people to "conduct" a survey by walking along the transect line, identifying the species, and writing them down on a slate. Those who got all species right were awarded a Reef Check t-shirt.

Rocky Mountain Reef Rendezvous

This summer, the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo (CMZ) in Colorado Springs, Colorado, held a special "Rocky Mountain Reef Rendezvous" action event to educate their guests about reefs. Michelle H. Brown, the Zoo's Hospital Manager, had submitted the idea to the Zoo and was given \$500 to implement an event that would provide zoo guests with the opportunity to get to know coral reefs better and learn ways that they can help protect them, even while living more than 1,000 miles from the nearest ocean.

The resulting Rendezvous included several stations and tables with fun activities and information on reefs. CMZ also donated a "Behind-the-Scenes" tour of the zoo's exhibits to anyone who donated to Reef Check, and the local chapter of the Association of American Zoo Keepers voted to match the donations collected for Reef Check.



our thanks to our Program Partners

Coordinators, Team Leaders, and Team Scientists Highlighted in blue

American Samoa

[Jeremy Goldberg](#)
American Samoa's Coral
Reef Advisory Group
American Samoa
Community College

Aruba

[Jim Rosborough](#)
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JADS Beach Store and
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1770 Reef Explorers
Adrenalin Dive
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Australian Government:
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CapReef
CoralWatch
Cruise Whitsundays
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Fantasea Cruises
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Great Barrier Reef Marine
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Griffith University
Haba Dive
Hamilton Island Resort
Hayman Island Resort
James Cook University
JCU Dive Club
Lychee Tree Resort
New Horizon (Cairns)
North Queensland Dry
Tropics Natural Resource
Management Board
Ocean Cat (Brisbane)

Oceanic Australia
PADI Asia Pacific
Pleasure Divers (Magnetic
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Project AWARE
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Operator
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Monterey Bay Aquarium
Moss Landing Marine Labs
MPA Monitoring
Enterprise
Ocean Adventure Dive
Company
Ocean Science Trust
OEX Dive and Kayak
Centers
Partnership for
Interdisciplinary
Studies of Coastal
Oceans (PISCO)
Reef Check CA Science
Advisory Team
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