

July 2008 Newsletter



Introduction

In July the Marine Park was accepted to present at the 11th International Coral Reef Symposium in Florida, the largest ever congregation of coral reef scientists and managers from around the world, and the keystone event of the 2008 International Year of the Reef. More about that in the following pages, but the biggest news this month is that we are finally legally recognized as a Non-Governmental Organization, a goal we have been striving towards since our conception. This achievement is a massive step towards true sustainable management of the Park and the effects will benefit all users of the Marine Park.

Personeria Juridica and the General Assembly



After years of waiting, the Marine Park is officially a legal entity, having received recognition as a N.G.O. by the Honduran Government. The Secretaría de Gobernación y Justicia in Tegucigalpa bestowed the Marine Park with the Personería Jurídica No. 283-2008 and approved the organization's Statutes. Furthermore, the current Agreement Letter signed with COHDEFOR will now turn into a Co-management agreement for the protected area, which makes the RMP a member of The Honduran Group of Protected Areas Co-Managers. Besides that, we are now members of Honduran Registry of Civil Non Profit Associations. All of these give recognition to our organization throughout the country, as well as the eligibility to apply for grants and present environmental complaints to judicial authorities. Also coming up in September is a General Assembly which will be open to the supporters, members and the general public to discuss the progress of the Marine Park, celebrate our NGO status and vote on the Board of Directors. Watch out for further details on this event.

Patrols



Throughout July, in addition to the daytime hours, the patrols operated five nights a week due to numerous reports of people poaching around sundown and early evening. Night patrols, however, are very tricky as it is extremely difficult to catch poachers in the act with such limited vision. A boat or a poacher becomes invisible to our patrols simply by switching their lights off when our engines are heard.

We always try to respond to calls in the evening but it is often hard to coordinate police, captains and boats if they are not working at the time of the call. To date we have only made a handful of evening arrests, highlighting the intricacy of the process.

This month's patrols resulted in two arrests and several confiscations of masks and snorkels. After reports of persons diving to the east of Bailey's Cay on Sundays, we organized a stakeout involving

plain clothed policemen and boat captains. After several hours of waiting, two young men from La Colonia where arrested for possessing speared fish, conch, and lobster. Several others were also involved, but after our boat captains searched the water with a mask, they were unable to find evidence of illegal activities. Since that weekend, there have been doing plain-clothed shore patrols in the vicinity every Sunday.

On July 26th, two young men fresh from the mainland were apprehended but released as it was clear to the boat captain and the police that the men were completely oblivious to the Park regulations. The dead give away was that they were still duck diving for conch as the boat came alongside them. The conch were seized and relocated, the snorkel gear was confiscated and they were brought to the office where they were cautioned and explained in detail the rules and the reasons for their enforcement.



Meetings and Workshops



James delivering his presentation

Every four years the International Coral Reef Symposium (ICRS) convenes as a major scientific conference to provide the latest knowledge about coral reefs worldwide. This year's 11th summit, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, drew over 3,500 experts from around the world. Natural scientists, educators, social scientists, conservationists, policy makers, economists, coral reef managers and users, and environmental journalists met together to advance coral reef science, management, and conservation. The ICRS is devoted to the best reef science available, with the purpose of sharing scientific findings with government agencies, resource management, and NGOs throughout the world. This helps organizations like the RMP improve their conservation and management strategies.

The ICRS was an ideal opportunity to tell the world about the Park and the challenges we face in managing a marine park on a fast changing island. James was accepted to give a presentation entitled "Challenges Facing a Marine Protected Area Management Body in the Context of a Rapidly Developing Tourism Industry" to an audience of over 1000 professional reef experts. The event was a great success and served to launch the Roatan Marine Park onto the international marine conservation stage. James spent the week networking with reef experts, comparing notes, gaining new ideas, promoting our research internship program and seeking new funding opportunities for the Park. The benefits for the RMP and for the community that we serve will be propagated through our activities for a long time to come. To find out more about this event visit <http://www.nova.edu/ncri/11icrs/>.



One of the 13 presentation rooms

Protected Area Connectivity Workshop



The RMP was invited to attend a Mesoamerican Coral Reef Targeted Research workshop (CRTR) being held in Florida by the United Nations University and the Nature Conservancy immediately after the ICRS.

Fortunately the organizers of the workshop paid for James's transport and accommodation so that he was able to attend both events free of charge. The workshop enabled all the major marine resource managers from Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras to convene and discuss ways to improve coordination of management between the different areas of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef.

It is increasingly being recognized that coral reefs are interconnected over vast spatial scales, and that to manage them on a local scale alone is not enough to ensure their long term survival. Evidence suggests that corals in Mexico can originate from larvae spawned in Roatan; Nassau grouper in Roatan can come from eggs that floated down from Belize etc. Without a regional management framework, local management alone will ultimately fail.



A series of recommendations arose from the meeting. A full breakdown can be seen at www.roatanmarinepark.com/CRTR.htm, but a brief summary is below:

Immediate action is required for effective reef conservation and resource sustainability. Based on this premise we recommend developing the following initiatives:

1. Improve or implement zoning of activities in marine parks.
2. Protect herbivore species (parrotfish etc.)
3. Enhance human connectivity. Promote exchange of fishermen among regions to compare notes and learn from each other.
4. Put in place policies to enhance sustainable fisheries and compensate fishermen who are economically affected.

EGMASA

In 2007, a group called EGMASA, a company created by the Spanish Government and belonging to the Spanish Environmental Ministry, visited Roatan to conduct a workshop with local businesses and dive shops. Their visit, funded by PMAIB, focused on engineering, works, and services. The group returned to the island this month to present their findings. Their results showed how businesses can improve environmental practices and reduce impacts. To find out more about the study, please visit www.cyan-animatica.com/honduras/esp_spn/index.html.

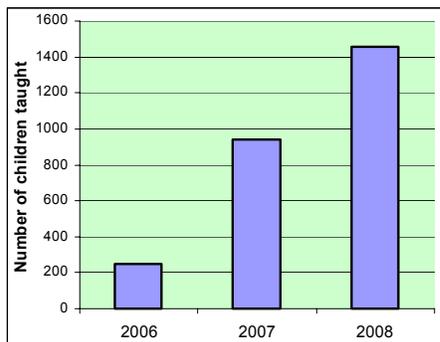
AFE-COHDEFOR



AFE-COHDEFOR (Honduran Corporation of Forestry Development) is a governmental entity in charge of the management of all of Honduras' protected areas. Since our activities are focused primarily on the Roatan Marine Park, we attended a workshop in La Ceiba with the co-managers of all the protected areas throughout the country. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss a document regarding the concession of recreational activities to businesses in protected areas. We await more details of the workshop and will keep you up to date with developments.

Education

One of our priorities at the Marine Park is to raise awareness and concern for environmental issues and promote environmentally responsible behaviors through environmental education to the general public. Many would agree that the best method is through educating the children, who then relay this message to their parents. The Park's schools education program started in 2006 with Lidia Salinas, who visited the schools in West End and Sandy Bay and the Alternative School.



To date, the education program has visited eleven schools throughout the island, including schools in West End, Sandy Bay, La Colonia Balfate, Mud Hole, Corozal, ESBIR, Coxen Hole, Children's Palace, Jonesville, Punta Gorda and Camp Bay. This year we have seen almost 1,500 children, the large majority we have visited more than once, giving presentations and taking them on the glass bottom boat and guided snorkel tours. As you may have read in previous newsletters, the kids are not only taught about the importance of conserving the reef and its inhabitants, but also the important functions that sea grass and mangroves have. They are also introduced to the concept of "Reducing, Recycling and Reusing", the best way to reduce the trash issues on Roatan.

Roatan Institute of Marine Sciences (RIMS) Visit

The children from the Sandy Bay Public School had the opportunity to learn more about coral reef ecology and conservation by visiting RIMS, located at Anthony's Key Resort. After a 10 minute walk from school, they were all very excited to have a closer look at invertebrates and turtles specimens, as well as other inhabitants of the amazing reef ecosystem. We would like to thank RIMS for the opportunity and hope in the future that we will be able to bring more students to the museum.



Wildlife Conservation Education



Since we know that conservation efforts should integrate terrestrial and marine ecosystems, the Wildlife Department from COHDEFOR provided the Marine Park with educational booklets regarding terrestrial wildlife conservation. Third graders from the Sandy Bay School had a very entertaining afternoon learning about threatened wildlife and what they can do to help with their protection. We especially focused on the importance of conserving their habitats and how illegal trading affects wildlife populations.

Exposing Journalists

Earlier this month Mayor Dale Jackson held a press conference with around 50 journalists from around Central America. As part of the event, they were invited to attend a glass-bottom boat tour with Mario in West Bay. James went along to act as tour guide, helping the journalists to understand what they were seeing and to answer their questions about why the reef is dying in West Bay and in Roatan in general. James gave them helpful pointers about the effects of unregulated building practices and poorly treated sewage on coral reef health. They went away awe-struck and highly informed about the stresses Roatan's reefs are currently facing and the socio-political sources of these problems. They will be disseminating their experiences throughout the regional media over the next few weeks.

Inspections

On Sunday July 27th we received information regarding a construction behind Las Rocas in West Bay. A developer had begun development and was filling in a previously heavily wooded area with red clay without a permit. After receiving the photos of the site, we forwarded this information to Lidia Medina, Environmental Coordinator for the Roatan Municipality. Lidia confirmed that the developer was operating illegally and has informed us that the relevant details have been forwarded to the FISCALIA. All we can do is wait and see what happens to the developer. Sadly, the current laws fail to ensure that the area is restored at the expense of the developer.



Runoff problems



On the hillsides, unsustainable activities are indeed a major problem affecting the reef. After a 20 minute rain a couple of weeks ago, the creek coming from La Colonia, loaded with rubbish, deposited tons of garbage directly to the sea by Sandy Bay. It took hours to clean the place, which reminds us that preventative activities save more time, money and efforts than response activities. Meanwhile we'll continue the education work we've been doing with the school from that community.

One of our upcoming projects will serve to mitigate the runoff coming from uphill, as well as an awareness campaign for the community of La Colonia.

Roatan Marine Park Southside Chapter

The Park patrols based out of Barefoot Cay have been busy this month with numerous confiscations from persons in possession of conch, lobsters, spears, spear guns, hooks, snorkel gear, and even scuba equipment. With the assistance of the Policia de Frontera, the confiscated items are either returned to the water (live or dead organisms) or delivered to DIGEPESCA, the governmental fishing authority on the island, which takes them to Tegucigalpa to be destroyed.



Presently there have been no arrests as the office operates a one strike rule. All those caught have had the rules explained and are released with a caution. So far there have been no re-offenders caught. Since patrols started last September, we have received reports from operators noting a decrease in persons diving for conch and lobster in the region, a sure sign the message is getting out. One thing is for sure, there have been increased reports of turtle sightings around the area, indicating that the patrols are having an effect.

Meeting

Due to confusion regarding laws in the area, an informal meeting was held on July 23rd at Barefoot Cay which was attended by dive shop operators, fishermen, and other stakeholders. One issue mentioned was divers collecting lobsters from the Cordelia Banks. It is legal in the Bay Islands only during season, July 1st to February 28th, if divers are in possession of a permit from DIGEPESCA and the lobsters taken are of legal size (tail length over 5½ inches or 14.5cm). In the Marine Park however, it is illegal to take any lobster at any time. This topic, as well as others, resulted in the conclusion that new regulations for the marine area need to be created and proposed to the Municipality as alterations to local bylaws.

It was also realized that a Dive Shop Alliance needs to be established to help coordinate dive schedules, regulations, and capacity of people per dive site per day, among other things. The reason for this is that some dive sites are being subjected to overcrowding by dive shops and unmanageable numbers led by Dive Masters, resulting in damaged sites, e.g. Mary's Place. This will not only be directed towards dive shops located on the southern shores, but others that use these sites.

Slowly but surely, things are improving on the south side, and with the help of dive shops and other businesses, conservation will truly be able to be spread island wide. Special thanks to Barefoot Cay, Dockside Dive Center, Cocoview Resort, Fantasy Island Resort, Reef House, Subway Watersports and Phoenix Biosystems.

Donations

Kayaks



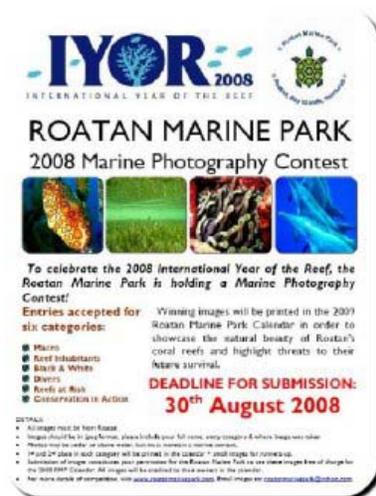
We would like to thank all the people and businesses that support us with donations by selling tags or becoming members and in many other ways. We just acquired two kayaks from Henry Morgan Hotel, this is very much appreciated since now we will be able to patrol around Half Moon Bay on cruise ship days (when necessary) or rent them out to generate revenue that can be invested in RMP's conservation efforts.

Online Donations



As a result of acquiring our NGO status, we are now able to accept online donations! This will be of huge benefit as it will allow people based outside of Roatan to donate to us should they so wish. We hope that this will make remote donations much simpler for all. If you would like to donate to the RMP online, please click on the "Donate" button (see example here) on the front page of our website (www.roatanmarinepark.com). Thank you in advance!

Underwater Photo Competition

A poster for the 2008 Roatan Marine Park Underwater Photography Contest. The poster features the text 'IYOR 2008 INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE REEF' and 'ROATAN MARINE PARK 2008 Marine Photography Contest'. It includes four small images of underwater scenes: a colorful fish, a green reef, a diver, and a blue underwater scene. The text below the images reads: 'To celebrate the 2008 International Year of the Reef, the Roatan Marine Park is holding a Marine Photography Contest! Entries accepted for six categories: Marine, Reef Inhabitants, Black & White, Divers, Reefs at Risk, Conservation in Action. Winning images will be printed in the 2009 Roatan Marine Park Calendar in order to showcase the natural beauty of Roatan's coral reefs and highlight threats to their future survival. DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSION: 30th August 2008'. There is also a 'DETAILS' section with small text.

It has long been talked about, now it is here! The 2008 Roatan Marine Park Underwater Photography Contest has begun! This will contribute to our efforts to promote the 2008 International Year of the Reef, and winning entries will have their photos printed in a 2009 Roatan Marine Park Calendar, as well as other merchandise such as mouse pads etc. Look for the posters around West End if you would like details on how to enter. Details of the competition are also available online, at <http://www.roatanmarinepark.com/Photo%20Contest.htm>. You can also view existing entries at this site. Judging by the standard so far, it is looking to be a tough competition! Deadline is 30th August 2008. Good luck to all of you who enter!

Wrapping Up

Thanks for reading and hope you will all be able to attend September's General Assembly Meeting.

Nicholas Bach, James Foley and Grazzia Matamoros