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PRESS RELEASE

No Reef Left Behind: Is Management of the Mesoamerican Reef Making the Grade?

(Belize City, Belize * Cancun, Mexico * Guatemala City, Guatemala * Tegucigalpa, Honduras– February 12, 2014) –

The coral reefs of Mesoamerica - Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico - are known for their striking beauty and colorful diversity, but are we doing enough to protect these natural underwater treasures? That is the focus of a just published study by the Healthy Reefs Initiative. Their 2014 Eco-Audit ranks the performance of how much progress has been made in implementing 28 reef management indicators. While the future of coral reefs remains in a delicate precipice, the results from this evaluation found encouraging progress has been made on some issues, but the collective pace of reef management must be accelerated in order to safeguard the Mesoamerican Reef.

The 2014 Eco-Audit of the Mesoamerican Reef (MAR) Countries is a systematic multinational evaluation involving four countries, over 50 organizations and more than 350 analytical documents - and is thought to be the only multi-national environmental audit of its kind globally. The 28 indicators are organized into seven key themes including *Marine Protected Areas; Ecosystems-based Fisheries Management; Coastal Zone Management; Sanitation and Sewage Treatment; Research, Education, and Awareness; Sustainability in the Private Sector; and Global Issues*. The first MAR Eco-Audit, was released in 2011, and was developed with the assistance of World Resources Institute and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Costa Rica.

“The real value of the 2014 Eco-Audit is to have one evaluation of the efforts of the four countries that share the responsibility of preserving all of the Mesoamerican Reef”, said Luis Bourillón, Mesoamerican Reef Program Director of COBI. “To my knowledge, there is no other such effort evaluating these benchmarks. This reference is essential to the work we do in marine conservation. What is not measured does not exist, and what is not communicated is of little use. HRI’s Eco-Audit is crucial and always appreciated by those interested in preserving this natural asset and demonstrating progress in overcoming the many challenges to conservation.”

The region-wide results for 2014 measured a ‘Fair’ level of positive implementation (2.9 out of a possible score of 5.0); with Belize maintaining the highest score (3.2) followed closely by Mexico (3.1), Honduras (2.7), and Guatemala (2.4). The theme

with the highest ranking (Good) was *Research, Education and Awareness* (3.9), followed by *Marine Protected Areas* (3.4), which also showed good improvement since the last audit. *Sustainability in the Private Sector* got a “Poor” score (2.4), although it showed improvement since the last audit. *Sanitation and Sewage Treatment* had the lowest score (2.3) with no improvements. Additional NGO and government effort in improving sanitation will not only benefit the regions reefs but also the health of the millions of people living along the coast.

Dr. Melanie McField, Director of the Healthy Reefs Initiative, says that within the Eco-Audit findings are some important success stories, particularly within the “Marine Protected Areas” theme. For example, all four MAR countries have now surpassed the 20% of sea within marine protected area target set by several other countries in the Caribbean Challenge. The MAR average is 35% of their full territorial seas now within MPAs (ranging from 60% in Guatemala to 20% in Belize). However, the amount under full protection (from fishing) remains surprisingly low (3% on average), presenting a clear opportunity for meaningful action to increase this amount.

Lisel Alamilla, Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment in Belize, said “The declaration of the Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve helped Belize achieve the target set by the Convention of Biological Diversity to protect 20% of its territorial seas. We applaud our neighbors for doing the same. Our next target is to expand the fully-protected replenishment zones that will ensure the survival of the livelihood of 3,000 fisher folks and the health of our sea.”

Protected areas alone are not enough to reverse the decline of coral reefs.

The new Eco-Audit findings highlight that the implementation pace of all 22 indicators measured in both the 2011 and 2014 Eco-Audits has been disappointingly slow. Across all countries, 80% of the indicators had no changes, with only 18% increasing in their score. Only one of the indicators has been fully achieved – the inclusion of 20% of the sea in MPA indicator.

If the current slow pace of management implementation continues, it will take over 50 years to fully implement the remaining management actions needed to sustain a healthy reef. Over the next 50 years, reefs will face greater stress from increasing population, growing seafood demand, and climate change.

“Swifter action now will be much more effective in safeguarding this natural treasure – and the billions of dollars per year in goods and services that it provides,” noted Andrea Rivera, National Autonomous University of Honduras.

This Eco-Audit presents readily available solutions accessible for immediate implementation. It reminds us that we don't really manage coral reefs - we manage human behaviors and our impacts on the reef.

Fishing pressure is one of the most direct actions we can readily control. Carlos Francisco Marín, Director of DIPESCA (the Fisheries Department of Guatemala) noted “Fishing in the Caribbean of Guatemala depends largely on the health of the reef and associated ecosystems. For us, the work of Healthy Reefs is an essential component of ecosystem-based fisheries management, along with technical guidelines for responsible fisheries from FAO.”

Tourism is the region's fastest growing industry and the industry is increasingly moving towards environmental sustainability. Victor A. Moncada, Representative of the Roatán Geotourism Stewardship Council, said "Our work with National Geographic creating the Go Blue Central America website has created a space where the private sector is successfully promoting their businesses while confirming their commitment to the conservation. There is a new awareness of how important sustainable tourism really is and how best practices and responsible management benefit everyone."

The broader context of managing coastal development has proven to be one of the toughest challenges to overcome successfully. Carlos Rafael Muñoz Berzunza, Secretary of Ecology and Environment, of Quintana Roo, Mexico said "We are at the forefront in terms of the existence of environmental planning tools such as: ecological management plans, natural protected areas and comprehensive programs for prevention and management of solid waste, however, the major challenge for all levels of government, is the effective implementation of these tools to improve the health of the Mesoamerican Reef."

The Mesoamerican Reef extends over 600 miles from the northern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico to the Bay Islands off the north coast of Honduras, including Guatemala's Caribbean coast and all Belize. HRI is a regional initiative that began in 2004 and now has over 50 local, regional and international conservation, research and management organizations dedicated to the conservation and sustainable use of this MesoAmazing reef.

To see the full 2014 Eco-Audit brochure (in English or Spanish); Results worksheets by country with folders containing all of the documents providing the verification of scores; and the verification report by PWC Costa Rica, go to <http://www.healthyreefs.org>.

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High resolution photos and video are available in the press folder – HRI website