



Healthy Reefs
for healthy people

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Cancun, Mexico * Belize City, Belize * Guatemala City, Guatemala * Tegucigalpa, Honduras

More Fish are Making the Mesoamerican Reef a Healthier Coral Reef

(Mesoamerican Reef – May 12th, 2015) -The Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative (HRI) today released its 2015 Report Card for the Mesoamerican Reef, recording an improvement in reef health from ‘Poor’ in 2012 to ‘Fair’ this year, primarily due to increased fish biomass.

The report is based on a new study of 248 coral reef sites along 1000 km of the Caribbean coasts of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras, which were monitored for living coral cover, fleshy macroalgal cover, herbivorous fish biomass (parrots and surgeonfish) and commercially important fish biomass (snappers and groupers).

Major findings include:

- The overall 2015 MAR Reef Health Index score was ‘fair’ (2.8), on a scale of ‘critical’ (1) to ‘very good’ (5), with encouraging improvements over the last report.
- Corals – the architects of the reef – have improved since 2006, increasing from 10%-16% cover; although fleshy macroalgae, the main competitors with corals for open reef space, have also increased.
- Commercial fish have increased in biomass – an important success - although large groupers are quite rare (only 4% of the 700 groupers counted were >40cm long) and are mainly found in fully protected zones of marine protected areas (MPAs).
- Fully protected areas had 10 times more snapper and grouper biomass than those within general use areas of designated MPAs or reefs with no protection. Collaborative efforts to rebuild fish populations through replenishment (=fully protected) areas are working.
- Key herbivorous fish continue to increase and are needed to reduce fleshy macroalgae that can kill or overgrow corals. The large parrotfish (most effective grazers) were found mostly in marine protected areas.
- Guatemala recently banned fishing of parrotfish for 5 years, joining Belize, which fully protected them in 2009, and the Bay Islands of Honduras, which protected them in 2004. Coastal Honduras and Mexico’s reefs are the last areas of the MAR allowing fishing of these keystone species. Efforts are underway to study and address this problem.
- The MAR is home to many large healthy stands of endangered elkhorn and staghorn corals - several of these reefs are now receiving extra protection to ensure their survival such as Limones Reef in Puerto Morelos, Mexico and Tela Bay and Roatán in Honduras.
- The MAR region is a global leader in MPA declaration - all four countries have achieved the target of protecting 20% of their territorial seas. The 45 MPAs in the MAR protect 23,492

km² of marine area and five new MPAs have been designated since 2011. However, only 3% of the regional territorial sea is under full protection from fishing, including large areas in Banco Chinchorro (Mexico) and Swan Islands (Honduras).

- About 9% of the reefs were in ‘good’ or ‘very good’ condition with key structural and functional components meeting target values. These reefs are healthy, acting to replenish other reefs and are more resilient to the escalating stress from global climate change.
- The majority of reefs (~74%) were in “poor” to “fair” condition, they have the potential to shift either towards a trajectory of recovery or decline depending on future disturbances, and most importantly, our ability to minimize human impacts.
- About 17% of the reefs were in ‘critical’ condition and may require further management intervention to prevent irreversible decline. There are 7% fewer reefs in critical condition when compared to the last report card.
- There are other issues that still need to be addressed to ensure the Mesoamerican Reef’s long-term recovery including: better management of agricultural run-off, adopting more sustainable coastal development practices, properly and adequately treating wastewater and pollution, and encouraging environmentally sustainable business practices. The management recommendations included in this report have been proposed by HRI partners as the key actions needed over the next two years to improve the reef’s health.

Quotes:

- *“Given the growing scientific concern about coral reefs and the general decline in fish stocks globally – our measureable improvement in the condition of the Mesoamerican Reef, particularly fish populations, is encouraging”,* says Dr. Melanie McField, Director of the Healthy Reefs Initiative/Smithsonian Institution.
- Dr. Jeremy Jackson of Scripps Institution of Oceanography and Smithsonian Institution remarked *“The exciting news that Guatemala has recently joined Belize and the Bay Islands of Honduras in banning the fishing of parrotfish is another critical step for the long-term conservation and recovery of corals on Mesoamerican reefs. Protecting herbivores of all kinds is critical to this endeavor. Congratulations to the Healthy Reefs Initiative for helping to promote this impressive effort, which I encourage other countries in the Caribbean to follow.”*
- Professor Peter Mumby of the University of Queensland stated: *"The science is clear that protecting parrotfish can help corals grow and maintain the high-quality reef habitat needed to support productive fisheries for the future. The Mesoamerican Reef has the potential to become the world's first international ecoregion to protect parrotfish in all of its reef area."*
- Dr. Sylvia Earle, founder of Mission Blue, previously joined the Healthy Reefs Initiative on a diving expedition to Honduras and expressed optimism with regard to the conservation efforts in the Mesoamerican Reef: *“You must be doing something right, because here, there are plenty of reasons for hope. Cordelia Banks, off Roatán, Honduras, is one of the best places I have seen, even counting 50 years ago, an amazing stand with acres of staghorn coral.”*

ABOUT HEALTHY REEFS FOR HEALTHY PEOPLE: HRI is a regional initiative that began in 2004 and now has 65 local, regional and international partner organizations, many of which contributed data for this report. The growing collaboration has not only enriched the quality of information, it has also increased the number of sites being monitored from 130 in 2010, 193 in 2012, to 248 sites in 2015, allowing a better understanding of the overall state of health.

ABOUT THE HEALTHY REEFS FOR HEALTHY PEOPLE REPORT CARDS: The 2015 Report Card for the Mesoamerican Reef is a user-friendly tool, published so that decision makers can have access to the most comprehensive scientific data available. The data guide decision makers in resource management policies, aimed at protecting both the reef and the livelihoods of communities depending on healthy coral ecosystems. The report also enables the evaluation of management actions at a regional scale and puts the concept of 'adaptive reef management' into practice. The Healthy Reefs Initiative publishes report cards every two years and previous reports published in 2008, 2010 and 2012 are available online at www.healthyreefs.org.

ABOUT THE MESOAMERICAN REEF: The Mesoamerican Reef extends over 1000 km from the northern tip of the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico south to the Bay Islands off the north coast of Honduras, including Guatemala's Caribbean coast and all Belize, which has the largest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere.

Find out more at: <http://www.healthyreefs.org>.

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