Female polar bear gives a piggy back ...
Fishy Parents Rejoice: Grades Rise, Few Fails on Caribbean’s Original Coral Reef Report Card

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This article was created in cooperation with iLCP Partner Healthy Reefs for Healthy People, one of the valuable organizations we joined with during our 2014 Mesoamerican Fish Refuge Campaign.

Healthy Reefs have fish for future generations.

A report card for the largest barrier reef in the Western Hemisphere gives hope that it may earn this year’s award for “most improved,” or perhaps “happiest fish.”

While many coral reefs continue to decline, the good news in the western Caribbean records a real increase in the amount of parrotfish, commercial fish (snappers/groupers). The report highlights almost a decade of improvement for the Mesoamerican Reef system, located south of the Gulf of Mexico and bordering the countries of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras.
Using techniques pioneered by the Healthy Reefs Initiative, the 2015 bilingual report card condenses abundant data for the Mesoamerican Reef into a number that translates roughly into a grade of C+ (or fair), and it shows strong improvement since 2006’s grade of C- (poor). Three of the report’s four major factors have improved from “poor” to “fair”: coral cover, herbivorous fish (such as parrotfish), and commercial fish. The regional grade for fleshy macroalgae, which can smother corals, remains poor.

Another major finding is that marine parks flourish in no-take zones, in comparison to parks that allow fishing. While the region’s four countries offer partial protection to more than 20 percent of their reef area, only 3 percent excludes fishing and other extraction completely. Since 2006, HRI researchers have found ten times more snappers and groupers inside these fully protected zones compared to the fished parts of the parks or reefs outside the parks.

The 2015 Report Card for the Mesoamerican Reef summarizes the collective knowledge of more than 60 organizations and 248 coral reefs. Stretching more than 620 miles (1000 kilometers), the Mesoamerican Reef includes the largest barrier reef in the western hemisphere boasts a diverse variety of reefs types and associated habitats, including seagrass beds, mangroves and estuaries.
The report card provides a sigh of relief to the scientific and diving communities that constantly uncover bad news for coral reefs worldwide. Recovery mode in this region contrasts with plummeting grades for many other reef systems suffering from overfishing, climate change, and death by thousands of cuts.

A healthy Mesoamerican Barrier Reef ecosystem that includes large schools of fish such as grunts and snapper as well as endangered Elkhorn Coral (Acropora palmate) within Limones, National Park, Puerto Morelos, Mexico.

iLCP Fellow Keith Ellenbogen saw the improvement first hand while diving in Mexico to photograph the reef: “As I descended beneath the surface within the Puerto Morelos Reef National Park, I felt as though I was transported back in time to the days of healthy coral reefs. The sea was filled with large schools of grunts and snappers in which their abundance transformed the color and sounds of the sea.”

Reef-building corals have also been increasing, and this turnaround gives hope to the report’s coordinator. “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 of the Smithsonian Institution.

Want more good news and novel solutions? Stay tuned for coverage of the report card’s sections that include:

- parrotfish protection
- sewage treatment
- tourism and management
- the future of the Mesoamerican Reef.

Learn more about the work of Healthy Reefs for healthy people, and watch the Spanish/English video summary of the Mesoamerican Reef 2015 Report Card.