

2021Eco-Audit Reveals Reduced Rate of Progress in Protecting the Mesoamerican Reef

*March 10, 2021 - Mesoamerican Reef Day * REVISED MARCH 18, 2021*
Mexico * Belize * Guatemala * Honduras

In celebration of Mesoamerican Reef Day, the Healthy Reefs Initiative released the 2021 Eco-Audit of the Mesoamerican Reef (MAR) countries – a rigorous evaluation of the region’s efforts to protect and sustainably manage its coral reefs. This Eco-Audit documents the extent to which 28 recommended management actions have been implemented in Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico since our last evaluation in 2016. The overall regional degree of implementation has improved from 54% in the first Eco-Audit of 2011 to 66% today. While this does demonstrate some progress, increasing the implementation by 1.2% per year on average over the last decade is far too slow. Our previous (2016) Eco-Audit urgently called for more swifter implementation of management actions – but the rate of implementing these management actions has actually declined, and the reefs have suffered. The Regional overall Eco-Audit score increased by 2% per year from 2011-2016 but slowed to 1% per year thereafter, despite our urgent calls in every Eco-Audit and Report Card to implement these needed management actions if we are serious about protecting the reef.

Belize again has the highest overall score (71%) with 9 indicators fully completed, but it also has the smallest increase (just 4% since 2011). This year, Honduras has achieved the second highest score (66% with a 12% increase overall). Mexico is close behind with the third highest score (64%), scoring a 10% increase since 2011. Guatemala maintains the lowest overall score (62%) but has recorded the largest overall progress (18%).

The Mesoamerican reef faces many rapidly intensifying threats, thus our protection measures also need to increase. The 2020 Mesoamerican Reef Report Card recorded our first decline in reef health in over a decade of monitoring, and the data were collected just before the new devastating stony coral tissue loss disease (SCTLD) outbreak impacted the MAR. The reefs also experienced back-to-back coral bleaching events since 2015, and most reefs have also experienced continued declines in water quality from pollution.

“We have known for over two decades what needs to be done – this Eco-Audit is evidence that some efforts are underway but the pace of these actions is far too slow”, said Melanie McField, Director of the Healthy Reefs Initiative. Only three indicators have been fully implemented by all four countries – and this was achieved in 2016 with no additional indicators achieving 100% implementation at the regional scale in the last four years.

Ranking our regional progress in implementing each theme

Celebrating the consistently highest achieving themes

The Research, Education and Awareness theme has consistently been the highest scoring theme (86%), although this year it had a slight drop from our last assessment (88%) due to the need for more socio-economic reef valuation studies. Our standardized monitoring, open data and public-oriented Report Card communications are working.

Ecosystem-based Fisheries Management had the largest increase (going from 60% to 72%) boosting it up to the second highest position. This increase is mainly due to Mexico’s declaration of protection for parrotfish and Belize’s full implementation of managed access (rights-based fisheries) nationwide.

Moderately scoring themes – one step backward and two steps forward

Marine Protected Areas dropped slightly (from 70% to 66%). The decline was partly due to the fact that our grading criteria for the percent of territorial sea and the percent of coral reef area that are within fully protected replenishment zones (indicators 1b and 1c) was finally raised from the intermediate criteria targets detailed in 2011. Both these Replenishment Zone targets are now set to our stated 20% target for full completion, as planned from the first Eco-Audit in 2011 and recommended in the 2008 Report Card. There were also recent impacts to management capacity and enforcement, particularly in Honduras, for MPAs that rely heavily on visitor fees - given the dramatic cessation of

tourism resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Guatemala had the largest (20%) gain seen in this entire Eco-Audit (with this theme going from 64% to 84% implemented) due to its new large fully-protected replenishment zone in Cayman Crown.

Coastal Zone Management (CZM) is considered one of the most critical management priorities within the region, balancing the need for economic development, sustainable livelihoods and long-term ecological sustainability. This score improved slightly from 60% to 66% with Mexico and Belize having the highest score (74%), despite persistent issues with lacking enforcement of these management plans, which is a problem within all four countries for all of the regulations.

Global Issues theme had a greater increase - from 56% to 64%, due to the ratification of international treaties including the Cartagena Convention, and adoption of carbon sequestration programs.

Dedicating more effort to themes with the lowest implementation scores

Sanitation and Sewage Treatment has traditionally been the lowest scoring theme but finally had a substantial improvement – going from 46% to 56%, with new infrastructure or improvements in wastewater facilities recorded in Guatemala and Honduras – which had the largest increase from 40% to 60% implementation. Unfortunately, inadequately treated sewage is still commonplace in the MAR region and deleterious to both human and reef health, particularly with the outbreak of stony-coral tissue loss disease throughout Mexico and some parts of Belize and Honduras.

Sustainability in the Private Sector showed no improvement and now ranks as the least implemented theme – stuck at 50%. Honduras has the highest score (64%), fully implementing the recommendation for government incentives for sustainable businesses. Several eco-labeling and certification schemes are underway for seafood and hotels and could result in future score increases if fully implemented.

While this Eco-Audit records progress through the end of 2020, The Healthy Reefs Initiative is delighted to announce the signing in February 2021 of two private sector agreements that will provide financial support off gross sales of ride shares (Lipo Ride) and an internationally awarded BBQ sauce (Lengua de Fuego).

More details on how the EcoAudit is performed

The Eco-Audit is a systematic and transparent evaluation of the degree of implementation of 28 recommended reef management actions that were made in the 2008 and 2010 Report Cards in order to catalyze faster, more effective implementation of recommendations and to increase accountability within the public and private sectors, and among non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This 2021 Eco-Audit is our fourth evaluation, enabling us to consider trends and rates of management progress. In addition to the comparative scores for implementation by each country, the Healthy Reefs Initiative recognizes the efforts, progress, and dedication of our >70 partner organizations throughout the region in our collective progress in protecting this valuable resource. We remain united and committed to safeguarding our Mesoamerican Reef and the communities it sustains.

Collaborative Achievements in the Region

- The MAR has 58% of its territorial sea within MPAs, but only 3% in fully-protected Replenishment Zones (RZs).
- Since 2011, six new MPAs have been designated.
- Fully-protected Replenishment Zones (RZs) have increased from 1610km² (2011 Eco-Audit) to 2020 km² in this study, but as a percent of the territorial sea it remains at 3%.
- 15% of the MAR's coral reef area is now fully protected in Replenishment Zones (RZs).
- Parrotfish are now fully protected in Belize, Guatemala, all of the Bay Islands in Honduras, and the Mexican Caribbean.
- The Cartagena Convention's Land Based Sources of Marine Pollution protocol has now been ratified by Belize and Honduras, and several new or improved sewage treatment facilities have been installed in the last four years.
- Regular standardized coral reef monitoring is conducted at least every 2 years, and used to guide management and recommendations promoted in widely accessible Report Cards.
- All data are open-access online at www.healthyreefs.org. (by 3/19/2021)

Country highlights and Quotes

Nicole Craig, HRI's Belize Coordinator said: "For quite some time, Belize has been an exemplary leader in conservation, but we cannot get too comfortable. With only a 3% increase since our last audit, it is important now more than ever, for Belize to continue making the tough, but necessary steps to safeguard our marine ecosystems."

Ana Giro, HRI Guatemala Coordinator stated: "Guatemala's first fully protected coral reef Replenishment Zone was established in 2020 in the recently discovered Cayman Crown Reef." We still need much more work to adequately manage our waste, from watersheds by reducing and treating upstream pollution."

Ian Drysdale, HRI's Honduras Coordinator said: "Honduras increased in 5 of the 7 themes, and now has fully completed six of the 28 recommendations (second to Belize's 8). We need to focus on creating more fish replenishment zones and protecting herbivores in the entire north coast."

Mélina Soto, Mexico's Coordinator stated: "Mexico is making great efforts in several themes toward more sustainable practices and adaptation to climate change. However, the increasing financial gap and lack of involvement from the private sector reduce our positive impacts, our treatment of waste is still an urgent issue to tackle."

For more information

Visit <http://www.healthyreefs.org> for the full Eco-Audit, including:

- A new interactive web exploration of the results by theme and country over the four assessments (2011, 2014, 2016 and 2021).
- 10 min 2021 Eco-Audit Results video.
- Detailed workbooks of the 2021 Eco-Audit results for each indicator and each country.
- Compilations of all verification documents for each indicator by country.
- The Revised 2021 Description of Indicators Document, including the justification and ranking criteria for each indicator, and data collection methods. This is a revision of the original (also available on our website) *2011 Eco-Audit of the Mesoamerican Reef Countries: Description of Indicators*. Healthy Reefs Initiative and World Resources Institute. 56pp. The six indicators added in 2014 are described in: 2014 Supplement to New Eco-Audit Indicators.
- Summary Results Table and PowerPoint presentation summary document.

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Post Note: Revision on 3/18/2021 is for Belize 3a: which ranked a 5 upon review – or 100%