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Belize Barrier Reef in Major Distress

Fri, November 14, 2008



Melanie McField

We always boast of having the second longest barrier reef in the world but many of us may not be aware that this World Heritage Site is in major distress. In fact a recent study revealed that only three percent of the one hundred and forty coral reef systems examined are in good condition and if allowed to continue to decline the effect will significantly affect the economy, tourism and marine life.

And it's not just Belize; the news is bad all along the Meso- American Reef which includes the entire reef

system from the northern tip of the Yucatan in Mexico to Belize and the Bay Islands of Honduras. Just how much the reef has been impacted has been outlined in the first comprehensive health assessment of the Mesoamerican Reef Ecosystem, MAR. Today that report card was shown during the 2008 International Year of the Reef Symposium.

According to Melanie McFleid of the three hundred and twenty six sites examined, forty seven percent has no living coral reef.

Melanie McField, Marine Scientist

"The majority were in poor condition so that is bad news for us. Only 47% of them were rated as poor and that's on a five point scale. We have six percent that are critical, even worse than poor. 41% are in fair condition which is basically, I would say they are reef that can be easily go up into a better condition. Good condition reefs are only 6% of the whole Meso-American Reef and we have none rated as very good. So we're missing an entire class of reefs that would be considered very good. We have 6% that are good, 6% that are critical, and then the majority are in that fair or poor condition.

Belize is actually a little worse than the Meso-American Reef. We only had 3% ranked as good. Using the same criteria, the same methods and everything and we had a little bit more, 53% in the poor category. So yeah things are not looking good. One difference in this study that differs from previous studies we've done is this was representative sites, so they selected at the University of Miami by GIS people looking at habitat maps, looking at the types of habitats and randomly picked sites. We didn't go out and cherry pick our favourite sites. My favourite sites weren't included so we have some sites out there that are good but they weren't included in this 326 which were randomly selected so it is a more robust result but it is difficult for us to swallow too because we know there are a few good reefs out there but they are few and far between. That is the main story but they re sprinkled throughout the area. Throughout the whole Meso-American Reef there are sprinkles of good reef sites, they are not limited to one geography area."

Jacqueline Godwin,

And the reefs that are doing fairly good, are those that are located in the marine protected areas?

Melanie McField,

"Not always, we were looking for that. It is not a clear significant trend so many of them are but it is not a significant correlation. It is not a good report card. If my kids came home with that they would be grounded and the TV taken away because it means we have to do something. We can't keep going business as usual. Some of these problems with the reef have, regarding climate change and hurricanes and storms, they are not necessarily our doing but we're doing a lot of things on local scales that are hurting the reef and we know what those things are, we've known for twenty years. We just keep doing them and we'll have to reduce the amount of those impacts that are under our control."

Jacqueline Godwin,

And if we don't?

Melanie McField,

"More orange will appear, more red will appear, and we're already kind of at the Caribbean average right now, our reefs are not looking better than the Caribbean average as they did 20 years so we can foresee being below the Caribbean average which I think is a real possibility if we keep on the same trajectory that's going on now."

Jacqueline Godwin,

And a decline on our coral reefs equal to a decline in our marine life as well.

Melanie McField,

"Yes and the marine life, the value of the fish we eat, the value of our tourism product which is really the biggest thing we have going on in the economy so it's directly tied. The health of the reef is tied to the health of the economy here in Belize."

Jacqueline Godwin,

Is it too late for us here in Belize to do anything to save our coral reef?

Melanie McField,

"No it is not too late and I think that is main point we want to make, now is the time to act to do more. I think we've gotten a little complacent in the last five to ten years of thinking everything's okay and we're a leader in marine conservation and we're doing good and we've kind of been resting on our laurels and it is time to get up because the laurels are worn out, we need to get out there and take some strong bold new actions and recently the government has been pushing some fisheries issues, some marine reserve enlargements and getting zoning passed. We've had moratorium on clearing mangroves and we're working on getting some new regulations that will be stronger on mangrove protection which clearly helps the reef too. So we have some steps underway but we need to do more."

Among the recommendations made is for government to create and implement a coastal zone management plan that includes at least twenty percent of the marine and coastal area.

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