

Coral reef initiative comes to successful end

By GENEVA NOEL

Freeport News Reporter



Although exploration efforts by New York's distinguished Explorer Club were delayed because of Tropical Storm Fay, the group was still able to gather marine information for its coral reef initiative and create an accurate map of the reef system within the Peterson's Cay National Park.

During a press conference yesterday, members of the Explorer Club officially brought their adventure to a close, describing it as a 'huge success' as they have made some headway in creating the digitally enhanced map that will help others gain a better understanding of how reefs and ecosystems work.

Biologist Dr. Stephan Harzen, who headed the exploration with fellow explorer Barbara Brunnick, said that this year marked the International Year of the Coral reef and it is increasingly important to protect the marine life that exists today for future generations.

He explained that even though their work was delayed because of torrential rain and high seas, Grand Bahama island was chosen for the initiative because the reef complex is large enough to be highly significant and small enough to be mapped in the time period available.

"The waters around Grand Bahama, like in most areas of the archipelago, are particularly well suited to create maps of underwater habitats due to clear visibility," said Harzen. Having conducted and participated in various research projects in The Bahamas for more than 10 years, Harzen said that he had developed his own bio-diversity mapping system combining advanced technology for the first mapping of this kind in The Bahamas and the wider Caribbean region.

Terrance Roberts, Director of Business Development with the Ministry of Tourism, said that in order for the islands of The Bahamas to maintain its competitive edge, it is important to have a sustainable, pristine ecology that will last a lifetime.

"We can generate many marketing opportunities from this, not only for business development, but to benefit future generations," said Roberts. Grand Bahama Port Authority Environmental Officer Nakeira Wilchcombe commended the group for their work, saying their explorations would be an asset to the Grand Bahama community.

"We are in the business of decision making for future developments and it is very important for us to know and understand our marine life and what we are trying so hard to protect," Wilchcombe said.

Aside from his exploration efforts, Harzen was also concerned with the amount of lionfish that were found in the surrounding waters.

The lionfish, which is an invasive popular aquarium species, is threatening to displace native fish and disrupt local fisheries.

Harzen said that if this invasion continues, our fishing industry, which is very important in a country like The Bahamas, could suffer.

Lionfish, Harzen said, feed on younger fish which may not be ready to reproduce, lowering the population. He suggested that the only way to cure the problem is to either kill them as we discover them or to consider the fish as a food supply.

He does caution Baham-ians to be educated on the preparation of the fish as their spines are venomous (though not fatal) to humans.

The enhanced map will become available in the last week in October and the group will be making periodic visits back to the site for verification purposes.

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