

SIDP *News*

Issue 5 August 2007

Community action for sustainable use and conservation of coral reefs

Surveys document reef change

Reef Check sites were established around the Bodgaya islands in 1998 during the first phase of the Semporna Islands Project, six years before the Park was gazetted. Since then they have been monitored by volunteers from the Marine Conservation Society in collaboration with Sabah Parks, and in March 2007 the four original sites and one 'new' site were surveyed during a Marine Science Expedition organised by Sabah Parks Marine Unit.

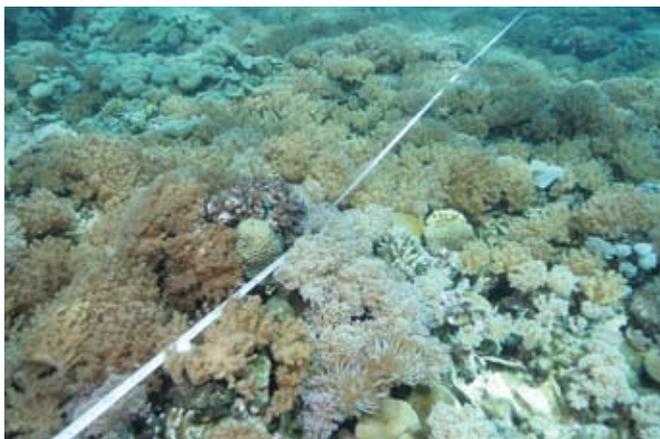


Divers from Sabah Parks marking the start of the survey line. The methods used in Reef Check are standardised and straightforward and provide a way of carrying out rapid surveys that can be repeated in future years.
E.Wood MCS



Dense and healthy hard corals in 1998

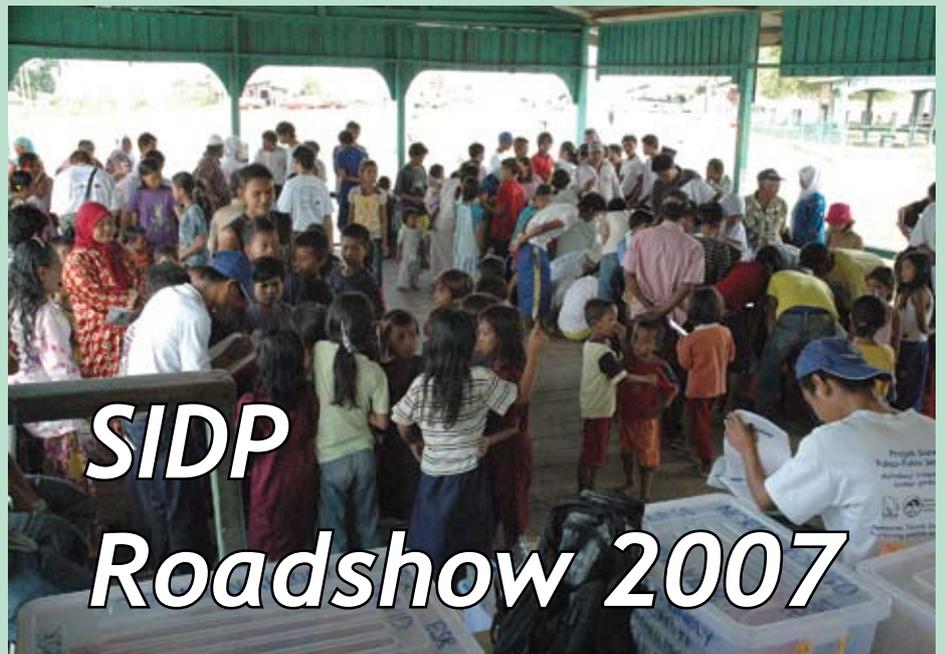
A detailed report of the monitoring work will be available shortly, and provides useful data on the status of the reefs and their resources. One of the worrying changes tracked by the surveys is the way that the ecology of the reef has completely altered in some places as a result of the death and collapse of reef-building corals. This is most noticeable at the 9 m depth site on Kapikan reef, which in 1998 had live hard coral cover of 73%. This year, however, hard coral cover was at a record low of 19% and the reef was carpeted instead with soft corals, covering 38% of the surface (up from 0.6% in 1998).



Kapikan monitoring site in 2007, now broken up and covered in soft corals

The trouble started when the hard corals were killed from a combination of coral bleaching (due to high water temperatures), fish blasting and predation by crown-of-thorns starfish. The piles of collapsed skeletons might perhaps have provided suitable habitat for renewed growth of hard corals, but instead it has been the soft variety that has moved in. These may look quite attractive, but the problem is that soft corals don't build reefs and provide virtually no shelter or food for reef fish. If this trend occurs more widely then the long-term outlook for the reefs is not good.

It became clear during recent fishing surveys carried out by SIDP around Semporna that many people on the mainland were still unaware of the existence and relevance of the Tun Sakaran Marine Park, and knew nothing about the proposed Park regulations. This situation needed to be rectified, and so the decision was taken to organise an 'Education and Awareness Roadshow'.



Our aim was to ensure that people inside and outside the Park were aware of the regulations and understood the zoning plan. We also wanted to spread the message that fishing and harvesting of natural resources in the Park was going to be regulated and that permits were going to be required for tourist and other activities.



The Roadshow Team at Kg Selakan

Another aim of the Roadshow was to entertain people and stimulate their interests in conservation and the Park by running competitions and interactive activities. We also appealed to everyone to help make the Park a success by adhering to the regulations and reporting illegal activities such as fish blasting.

All the settlements in the Park were visited (12 kampongs plus scattered settlements on the Sebangkat reef top), together with 48 selected kampongs on the mainland and adjacent islands. The Roadshow also went to local government offices, army and police posts, local tour companies and a total of 10 schools.



Posters and quiz being explained during the Roadshow



A specially designed cartoon colouring book produced for the Roadshow was popular with both children and adults.

The SIDP DVD was shown at each of the locations, and following this, the team invited people to get involved in the competitions and other activities and asked the adults to fill in a short feedback so that we could learn more about their knowledge of the Park and how often they visited it. Information posters and a copy of the regulations were left behind so that people had access to information about the Park at all times.



Sabah Parks

Thanks to our Treasure Chest sponsors

A range of Roadshow materials was developed, with the aim of providing information, variety and interest. These were stored in 'Treasure Chests' (large plastic boxes) that were set out in the display areas and helped to stimulate curiosity. SIDP sincerely thanks the following companies and organisations for their generosity in sponsoring the Treasure Chests.

LKWID

Singapore American School
 Singamata Adventures Semporna
 Pulau Sipadan Resort and Tours Sdn Bhd
 North Borneo Dive and Sea Sports Sdn Bhd
 Borneo Divers and Sea Sports (Sabah) Sdn Bhd

Children discovering more about their environment through one of a set of jigsaws illustrating the wildlife of TSMP.



Sabah Parks

Competition to 'guess the number of fish species in the Park' underway at Selakan.



T. Lim Scubazoo

Josie and children with their bags of litter collected during one of the 'Roadshow clean-ups'.

BBC TV visits project site



H. Brunt

BBC camera crew filming in Semporna fish market for "Saving Planet Earth"

This July, SIDP activities featured in the 'Oceans' episode of a series of childrens' programmes in the current 'Saving Planet Earth' season on BBC TV. Josephine Tiplady from UK visited Sabah with CBBC to look at the plight of the region's coral reefs, turtles and sharks, and to see some of the conservation work that is being carried out.

One event that Josephine participated in was the release of young mouse grouper on to one of the newly-protected reefs in the Park. Some months ago, the SIDP team had also released young Napoleon (humphead) wrasse at the same site. In both cases the aim was to help re-build populations of these seriously over-exploited species by locating them on a 'no-take' reef where they will be able to live and grow undisturbed and gradually build up breeding populations. Breeding adults of both of these species have been virtually wiped out of the 350 km² Park due to intense fishing pressure to supply the live fish trade.

A total of 130 young mouse grouper (*Cromileptes altivelis*) were donated by the Sabah Department of Fisheries, who have successfully cultured this species. The mouse grouper is quite a shy fish that tends to hide away amongst corals, but we hope to be able to locate some of the released specimens when the site is re-surveyed later this year.



Scubazoo senior cameraman Roger Munns filming Josie at Boheydulang before the release of the mouse grouper



H. Brunt

Assessing fishing activities



Irwan Mustapa interviewing fishermen on Pulau Maiga.

The reefs in what is now the Tun Sakaran Marine Park (TSMP) have been over-exploited for many years and as a result, fish populations have dropped to a very low level. Urgent steps are now being taken to promote recovery by regulating marine resource use and introducing 'no-take' areas where fish populations can build up. As part of the monitoring programme to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives, SIDP has recently been collecting baseline information on current use and availability of fish species in the Park.



Even though fishermen may target certain families or species they usually keep whatever is caught and there is probably very little wastage.

The survey was conducted through interviews with fishermen groups based at four separate locations in the Park who typically had 15-20 years of fishing experience in the area. They used a range of gear, including hook and line, bottom long line, pelagic long line, nets, traps and fish stakes. The results showed that 207 species are on the 'catch' list, including 28 species of rock cod and groupers, 19 species of snapper, 19 species of surgeonfish and 17 species of jacks. There was almost universal agreement that virtually all fish are more difficult to find now than they were 10 years ago.

The market price for fresh fish ranges from RM2-3 /kg for fish such as sprats and threadfin bream to over RM6/kg for some groupers, snappers and mullet. Very much higher prices are obtained for live fish, especially the humphead wrasse and mouse grouper, both of which are in short supply.



Species such as this coral hind *Cephalopholis miniata* are usually kept alive because they command a consistently higher market price than fresh fish.

Very many thanks to Scubazoo for supporting SIDP, and for providing office space in KK for our local officer, Helen Brunt.



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