After completing the first supporting activity of the year in March and April, the programme with the schools on the Marine Park Islands funded by Alstom Power continued with the first Coral Reef Camp of the year in Tioman on 26th – 28th June 2010.

A Reef Clean up Event was also organised over the same weekend in conjunction with World Oceans Day by the Department of Marine Parks, which saw a total of 90 volunteers removing Crown of Thorns Starfish and rubbish at various sites.

A combined closing ceremony for the Coral reef Camp and Reef Clean up programme was held where parents of the children and volunteers were entertained by the children's performance which was part of their activities during the Camp.

The KPMG funded programme for SK Taman Tun Dr. Ismail also held their Coral Reef Camp in Tioman earlier that month. A total of 21 students accompanied by 5 teachers as well as 6 facilitators from KPMG participated in the camp and they all gained valuable experience of living in the outdoors and learning about the different environments on the island.

Starting this year, CIMB Foundation is funding the Rainforest to Reef Programme in 6 secondary schools around Klang Valley. The programme has started in 4 of the schools and will continue on until end of the year. The programme for these schools will consist of 4 activities, including a 3R workshop and a site visit to the Zoo Negara.
The Association of Operators Pulau Perhentian Terengganu (Persatuan Pengusaha-pengusaha Pulau Perhentian Terengganu) has been organising a monthly beach cleanup since March this year. These cleanups have been conducted every month since then and numerous resorts and dive centres have participated. Some tourists who were around have also been kind enough to lend a hand during cleanups.

The Association has approached Dato’ Haji Wan Zahari B Wan Ngah, the Director of TREVICOSTA (Terengganu Riverine and Coastal Authority) to be the patron and he has agreed to accept the appointment. This will be a step forward for the Association as it seeks to play a more visible role in representing the business community on the islands during discussions among stakeholders, especially at State and Federal Government level.

Late last year, RCM conducted a 3-days training for snorkel guides in Perhentian. Training resumed in April this year with a total of 75 snorkel guides and boatmen assessed on the way they brief the customers and teach them to use the equipments. They are now certified as eco-friendly snorkel guides and have received materials to assist them in their snorkelling operations. We hope to get feedback from any tourists that have visited the Perhentian Islands recently and did snorkelling trips with any of the guides on the islands.

As part of the project, RCM aims to improve communications on the islands between operators, tourists and stakeholders. With this in mind, RCM, through the Association has set up a website and Facebook group for the Association. The website can be found at www.perhentian.island.org and the Facebook group name is Persatuan Pengusaha-pengusaha Pulau Perhentian Terengganu (PPPPT). Feel free to visit the sites and leave your feedback, especially if you have just recently visited the Perhentian Islands.

Malaysia is part of the “Coral Triangle”, the area of the world’s oceans recognized by scientists as having the highest biodiversity. Coral reefs therefore represent an economically important ecosystem and are the foundation of a significant percentage of the country’s tourist industry. There are some 3,600 km² of reef around the country, including fringing reefs and offshore islands. Over 350 species of hard coral have been identified in Malaysian waters.

However, a lack of comprehensive management programmes is leading to degradation of this important economic resource. This situation is exacerbated by inadequate information on the status and location of the reefs, further hindering management efforts.

In 2001, Reef Check Foundation appointed a National Coordinator for Malaysia, to promote Reef Check and carry out training and surveys. While there were some successes, lack of funding and support prevented the coordinator from having a major impact on marine conservation in Malaysia.

In 2006, the British Government provided funding for a one year project to establish a more sustainable Reef Check programme in Malaysia. That project culminated with the registration of Reef Check Malaysia Bhd as a non-profit company in August 2007.

In conjunction with the 3-months long Starhill Gallery Arts Festival from July until September, Malaysia’s celebrities will unite in the name of coral reef conservation and charity in the first Starfish charity auction. These starfish, decorated by the celebrities, will be auctioned during the Arts Festival Gala Night. You too can be part of this, when you get a Starfish, with a minimum RM20 donation, from the Starhill Gallery Concierge and stand a chance to exhibit your work of art to raise funds for Reef Check Malaysia.

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CORAL BLEACHING

Three months ago, the Malaysian Meteorological Department reported that there will be a dry spell in Peninsular Malaysia as well as Sabah due to the El Nino weather phenomenon which brings about less rainfall than usual. Now, the effects of El Nino, together with the effects of the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD), which brings warm waters from the Indian Ocean, have taken their toll on coral reefs around Malaysia where there have been extensive reports of coral bleaching around the islands and coastal areas of Peninsular Malaysia.

Bleaching occurs when corals are stressed, in this instance by warm water. This causes them to expel the photosynthetic zooxanthellae algae (zoox for short!) living within them that give them their colour, leaving behind the white skeleton. Zoox provide the coral with a large proportion of its nutrients.

Bleaching can be reversed as corals can survive without their zoox for short periods of time. However, if corals are stressed for extended periods of time, they will die from lack of nutrients.

To enhance chances of survival of coral reefs, it is very important for all parties to play their part to help coral reefs to recover from this bleaching event by reducing the stress corals have to face. RCM is working together with the Department of Marine Park Malaysia, dive centres and resort operators to conduct surveys and discuss what measures can be taken to reduce stress levels in affected areas.

Below are some steps you can take to reduce stress on corals when you are visiting the islands:

1. Do not touch or step on corals as any physical contact will damage the corals.
2. Avoid using sunscreen lotion as chemicals from the lotion create an environmental stress to the corals.
3. Talk to your operators and try to avoid crowded areas to reduce impacts on the coral reef.
4. Do not litter on the beach or into the sea.
5. If you are diving or snorkelling, try to pick up any trash you see in the water.

You can also play a part by taking simple steps below which will reduce your production of greenhouse gases that causes climate change:

1. Switch off the lights or fan when not in use.
2. Turn off the tap when not in use.
3. Reduce the consumption of electricity through unnecessary usage of air-conditioner.
4. Use public transportation or car pool instead of driving alone.
5. Do not leave your electrical appliances on or on standby if not in use.

More information on bleaching can be found at the end of the newsletter.

Supporters

Reef Check Malaysia is grateful to the following organisations for their support: Without their help, we would not be able to continue our work to preserve Malaysia’s marine resources.
Q: What are corals?
A: A coral is made up of thousands of tiny animals known as polyps. These animals have microscopic plants called zooxanthellae (Zoox) living within them. The Zoox provide more than 70% of the nutrients needed by these polyps to survive. These Zoox also give the transparent coral polyps the different colouration we see in the oceans.

Q: Why are corals important?
A: Coral reefs are valuable resources, attracting millions of visitors annually in Malaysia. Besides tourism, coral reefs are also important as nursery grounds for fisheries resources as well as providing job opportunities for thousands of people in the country, especially local communities on the islands and in coastal areas.

Q: What is coral bleaching and why do they bleach?
Coral bleaching occurs when the coral loses its colour and turns white as a result of the polyps expelling the toxin producing Zoox. This happens because the coral is stressed from environmental factors such as temperature, water salinity, water quality and many others.

Q: Can the bleaching be reversed?
Yes, it can be reversed if the stress is lifted off as these polyps can still survive without the Zoox for a short period of time. However, if the stress is not removed in the long run, the bleaching will continue and the coral will die in the end due to the insufficient nutrients it needs to survive.

Q: What can I do to help the corals?
- Do not buy souvenirs made of corals or sea shells.
- Do not collect shells or corals, whether alive or dead. Leave them where they are for others to see and enjoy.
- Do not litter because your litter can kill marine life.
- Help to reduce plastic waste by reusing your empty water bottle. Refill it at the resort’s restaurant.
- When snorkeling, do not touch corals. Corals are fragile animals that will break under pressure.