Southern Leyte Coral Reef Conservation Project (LRCP)

Monthly Project Update
August 2019

Location: Napantao Dive Resort, Napantao, San Francisco, Southern Leyte

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LRCP Project Aim

The Southern Leyte Coral Reef Conservation Project (LRCP) is a collaborative project to protect the coral reefs of Sogod Bay, providing training and conservation education opportunities for local Filipinos, as part of an integrated programme to develop local capacity and ensure the long-term protection and sustainable use of marine resources throughout the region. Coral Cay Conservation (CCC) is working at the invitation of and in partnership with the Provincial Government of Southern Leyte (PGSL). CCC provides the resources to help sustain livelihoods and alleviate poverty through the protection, restoration and management of coral reefs and tropical forests.

Latest News

Dive training at CCC

We ran a number of different PADI scuba diving courses on base this month. Carmelo Urbanes, our monthly scholar, was trained in both his Open Water and Advanced Open Water courses. From having no experience in diving, his skills improved tremendously while he was here and at the end of his stay he was a highly competent and safe diver. Andres, a short-term volunteer, joined Carmelo on his Advanced Open Water course. After a bit of trepidation in the beginning due to the fact that an injury had prevented him from diving for a long time, Andres quickly rebuilt his confidence in the water. Finally, another volunteer (Ana) completed her Rescue diver course. Overall, it has been a busy month of dive training!
Story of the Month

We have a new boat captain!

Coral Cay Conservation has been fortunate enough to have the same boat captain, known to us as ‘Bok’, for the last ten years. However, Bok has moved to the other side of Sogod Bay and has decided to retire from his duties with us.

Fortunately, Ricky has been Bok’s assistant for almost as long as Bok has been our boat captain. We have thus proudly promoted Ricky to be our new boat captain, something he has been training for for a long time.

After some legal work, Ricky is now officially our boat captain and he has the duty of choosing a new trainee to become his assistant. During our Catig survey, we had three different men spend the day with us on the boat to see how they get along. Ricky will choose one of them, who will become trained and employed by CCC as our new boat assistant.

We hope that Ricky will enjoy being our boat captain for a number of years to come, after being an assistant for so long, and we look forward to having somebody new join our team!

Educational and Community Projects

MPA assessment presentation at Himbangan

In 2017, Coral Cay Conservation conducted an assessment of the Marine Protected Area (MPA) at Himbangan. This is a long standing MPA that was approved in 1998. We conducted survey dives both inside and outside the MPA to compare the abundance of fish and invertebrates to determine the effectiveness of this MPA in protecting marine life. A report was written and finalised in 2019 (which can be requested from https://www.coralcay.org/publications-and-data or through lrcp@coralcay.org).
This month, our Project Scientist (Chantel) visited Himbangan to present the results and deliver the report to the council. The results highlighted that even though fish abundance was higher inside the MPA compared to outside, a lack of large commercially important species suggested that the MPA was not being effective, potentially due to poaching in the MPA. However, there were significantly larger abundances of invertebrates and hard corals within the MPA, which suggests the potential for this MPA to be effective under correct management.

The council were receptive to the presentation and were thankful that we conducted this assessment and updated them on how their MPA was performing. We hope that this MPA will become more effective in the future so that fish stocks can be preserved for future generations.

Survey Monthly Update

Survey background: Since January 2013, survey efforts have been focused on assessing potential and existing Marine Protected Areas in Sogod Bay to provide appropriate management recommendations. To do this CCC uses an expanded version of the Reef Check protocol, which has been customised to perfectly fit our work in Sogod Bay. Prior to this a baseline appraisal of marine resources in Sogod Bay was carried out. As of 2018, CCC has been using a revised approach to assess the effectiveness of CCC’s previous efforts in establishing Marine Protected Area’s (MPAs) with the goal of understanding the barriers associated to their establishment in the Southern Leyte Province. If you would like more information about our surveying please contact our Project Scientist, Chantel Elston at lrcp@coralcay.org.

Catig survey successfully completed!
From 2018, we have introduced a new survey methodology to assess the effectiveness of implemented MPAs. To do this, we have adopted a BACI (Before-After-Control-Impact) approach. We have 6 sites, 3 of which have an established MPA (Impact Sites) and 3 of which do not have an MPA but meet the criteria for inclusion (control sites). By re-visiting these sites and surveying their reefs, we can compare the data for the site with protection and those without to understand the benefits of MPA implementation in Sogod Bay.
Catig, Liloan is the second impact site under this design to be surveyed in 2019. The MPA was established in 2016, after CCC’s recommendation at the beginning of 2015. This survey included six transects, three at 6m and three at 12m, all within the MPA. The team at CCC have completed surveying all of the transects with various fish, substrates and invertebrate species identified. Our whole team loved the beauty of this MPA! There were large areas of branching hard corals that looked like beautiful underwater coral gardens. A number of juvenile fish were seen to hide in amongst the branches of these corals and large fish were also seen in the area. The team also identified a number of colourful nudibranchs that we had not seen before. The data that were collected can now contribute to the large dataset acquired and can be included in comparative analysis when all the designated BACI sites are complete.

This is an exciting time for CCC as the results from the BACI surveys provide a unique opportunity to utilise baseline data that aims to provide local stakeholders with recommendations for MPA establishment, to provide resource managers critical data on the performance of their MPAs.

Scientific reports from all of CCC’s sites around the world are available on our website at http://www.coralcay.org/science-research/scientific-reports
Marine Scholarship News

Each month CCC offers Filipino nationals who display an ambition to study and protect the vital marine ecosystems of the Philippines an opportunity to take part in our Marine Conservation Scholarship. The programme lasts for one month and involves training in SCUBA diving to the level of PADI Advanced Open Water. Scholars then take part in an intensive Skills Development Programme giving them the knowledge and expertise to conduct sub-marine surveys of the coastline.

This month we welcomed Carmelo Urbanes to the CCC base as our monthly scholar. Carmelo has received a Bachelor of Science in Biology from the University of the Philippines and is currently a researcher for the Naval Research and Technology Development Center. Having a background in biology, Carmelo understood the importance of coral reefs and was excited to play a part in their protection. He quickly completed our Skills Development Program and became a highly competent coral reef surveyor – so much so that he even led two survey dives! Having no diving experience before he arrived, he successfully completed his PADI Open Water and Advanced Open Water courses with us. He learned safe diving practices while being with us and we know these skills will benefit him in the future.

“My experience with the CCC program has both been fun and scholastic. I have learned a lot about marine conservation and why surveys and studies that come out from those surveys are important in determining the current status of our reefs and how different factors affect the marine environment particularly human activities. I am very happy that the program chose my country as host. Even if there is not much support from our government with regard to giving solutions to environmental concerns, I hope that CCC continue to exist here so that maybe in the future my fellow countrymen will become more aware of conservation. Thank you to all the staff that I met here. You have all been very nice, supportive, and excellent educators. Maraming salamat.”

If you would like to apply for the CCC Marine Conservation Scholarship programme or read more about it, please visit: [http://www.coralcay.org/volunteer/scholarship-opportunities/](http://www.coralcay.org/volunteer/scholarship-opportunities/)
Creature of the Month

This month, our creature is the harlequin sweetlips, *Plectorhinchus chaetodonoides*. The juveniles of this species, affectionately referred to as "wigglebums", are a house favourite and our team was very excited to spot a number of them on our survey of Catig.

The harlequin sweetlips is a species of grunt native to the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific Ocean. It lives in coral-rich areas in clear lagoons and seaward reefs and can be found at depths from 1 – 30m. It is a medium-sized species that can reach up to 72cm in length and weigh up to 7kg. It is of minor importance to local commercial fisheries.

There are numerous reasons why we love the juveniles of this species in particular. They exhibit a beautiful coloration that is very different from the adults – they are brown in colour with large white blotches. But what makes these juveniles so unique is their swimming behaviour. They are known to flail around with seemingly no sense of direction and they look as though they don’t quite know how to use their fins to swim properly. However, silly as though this may seem at first, this is a very clever strategy to avoid predation. Both their colour and weird swimming pattern mimic a poisonous flatworm that predators specifically avoid. So even though these juveniles may act and look like the clowns of the oceans, they are perfectly adapted to survive and avoid predators.

As the juveniles mature, their spots reduce in size, become more numerous, and turn from white to black. Adults have the thick lips that are usually associated with the sweetlips and they are nocturnal predators, feeding on benthic crustaceans, molluscs and other fish.

Learn More!

To learn more about the CCC Philippines project, to join the expedition, or to find out about local marine scholarships, visit [www.coralcay.org](http://www.coralcay.org)