Southern Leyte Coral Reef Conservation Project (LRCP)

Monthly Project Update
November 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

Goodbye to Scoob, Chantel and Charlotte, welcome Rachel and Beth!

This month we said goodbye to our Scuba Diving Instructor Scoob, Project Scientist Chantel, and Science Officer Charlotte. They have all worked extremely hard to progress the project here, and will be missed dearly. Each of them were asked to give a personal highlight from their time working for CCC in Napantao.

Scoob - “A real personal highlight for me was watching the change in Ricky throughout my time here. When I arrived he was a very shy assistant boat captain, but he persistently proved himself through his hard work, until he was promoted to boat captain. Since then he has gained so much confidence in himself and as a captain which was lovely to see.”

Chantel - “My highlight of the past 6 months in the Philippines has been experiencing the natural wonders of this beautiful country - from vibrant coral reefs to breath-taking
Charlottenote - “For me, the reason that I enjoyed this job so much, was the same as why I chose it - because I love diving and teaching. No matter how experienced a diver was, to watch people’s reactions when they first saw the house reef here was amazing, it’s so nice to be able to share that with people. You can really see it in their faces when they first descend on the reef, and it makes me get that same feeling all over again. I’ve also really enjoyed teaching all of the volunteers no matter what their previous knowledge was, sometimes they have even taught me during great discussions!”

Replacing Chantel and Charlotte are Rachel as the new Project Scientist and Beth, as the new Science officer. After graduating from university with a MSci in Environmental Geoscience, Rachel moved to S. W Madagascar for a year to work for a marine conservation organisation as a field scientist. Whilst there she specialised in coral genus identification and benthic ecology. She is looking forward to learning about the Philippines both above and below the water.

Beth has always had a fascination with the oceans. Studying first Biology then Marine Management, she has recently worked as a wildlife guide in Scotland. She is excited to be diving again in warmer waters!

Story of the Month

Swimming with whale sharks in Tabugon!

After hearing multiple sightings of whale sharks in the area, we thought that it would be a good time to go out and see if we could find some for ourselves. Six of us travelled in two motorised pump boats up north, to Tabugan’s Marine Protected Area (MPA), a location that our boat captain Ricky knew was good for spotting whale sharks.
After around 1 hour of driving in the boat and circling the same area, it was safe to say we were losing hope, after all the ocean is a huge place and whale sharks need to be almost at the surface to be able to spot them.

Quite casually, Ricky suddenly points and says, “whale shark, there”, we thought he was joking at first but when we looked in the direction he was pointing, there was a whale shark, swimming right towards us! After frantically trying to put our masks, snorkels and fins on, we jumped in the water and started swimming next to a ~6m whale shark that we suspect may have been pregnant because of its swollen looking stomach.

We assumed the whale shark would swim away, but it seemed completely un-phased by us, swimming at a steady pace and regularly coming close to the surface wide mouthed, filtering out as much plankton and krill that it could.

The first encounter lasted around 5 minutes, then we got back into the boat expecting that to be it, so we were pretty excited when Ricky spotted another one! This whale shark had distinctive nick marks on its tail, possibly from a boat collision. We followed it for around 20 minutes, but it was quite the challenge to keep pace with the whale shark despite it appearing to be effortlessly gliding through the water. We couldn’t believe our luck when a third smaller whale shark appeared in front of us, and for a few minutes the two of them circled us whilst continuing to feed.

It’s safe to say this was an experience that none of us will ever forget, and we are all very grateful for Ricky’s whale shark spotting skills!

One of the whale sharks that we swam with whilst it regularly came to the surface with its mouth wide open to feed on plankton. Photos by Beth Harvey
Educational and Community Projects

Santa Paz Norte National High School achieves level silver of Sea Stars

Following on from last month’s completion of the Seastars Educational Awareness Scheme (SEAS) level bronze, Chantel (PS), Rachel (PS), Beth (SO) and Pallavi (volunteer) travelled to Santa Paz Norte National High School to deliver the silver level of the programme. SEAS is a tiered education programme that aims to raise awareness of environmental issues within local Barangays.

We were greeted by lots of excited kids at the school as we set up the presentation. Chantel began by recapping what was covered last time, then Rachel described each of the coral life forms that we categorise hard corals into. To reach the silver level of SEAS, a class must establish a student-run environmental committee, which we met with after the lesson.

Santa Paz Norte High School’s environmental committee is now organising their own environmental action day, however with intramural sport matches and Christmas holidays taking up most of December, it is being scheduled for some point next year. We look forward to hearing their plans and hope that we will be able to join in the new year!
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, Rachel Knowles at lrcp@coralcay.org.

Nueve Estrella Norte survey completed!

After the changing of the seasons from Habagat to Amihaan, the weather is now calm enough for us to survey sites in the east of Sogod Bay, as wave action picks up on the Pacific side of the peninsular. This was the final site of our BACI (Before-After-Control-Impact) schedule, being one of the sites that we had surveyed before and now also after the implementation of a MPA. In 2014, CCC visited Nueve Estrella Norte to conduct an assessment of the reef, and made recommendations on the implementation of a MPA in this Barangay.

In 2018 CCC conducted a Rapid Visual Assessment (RVA), before returning this month to complete a survey inside of the established MPA. There were no demarcation buoys at this site but with some help from our GPS device, we completed three transects at 6m, and two transects at 12m, so a total of 20 replicates. The reef seemed to have many juveniles of commercially important parrotfish, with generally higher numbers of fish in the south of the MPA. Multiple turtles were spotted coming up for air during our surface intervals, and we were even lucky enough to swim with a whale shark on our way back to base one day after surveying!

These surveys will provide local stakeholders with valuable information on how their MPA is performing, how this protected status has affected their coral reef ecosystem, and it will allow recommendations for future management to be made.

Scientific reports from all of CCC’s sites around the world are available freely by request. If you would like to request reports, please contact info@coralcay.org.
Creature of the Month

Despite our incredible encounters with whale sharks this month, we didn’t want to forget to mention the day that a pod of ~30 short-finned pilot whales escorted us back to site after a day of surveying in Nueve Estrella Norte. Part of the Delphinidae family, short-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala macrohynchus*) are widespread throughout both coastal and pelagic waters in the tropics, however their range has been increasing along with rising ocean temperatures.

Their diets consist mainly of squid, although they will also eat octopus, cuttlefish and other small fish when food is scarce. They often following the movements of squid in high speed pursuits at depths of up to 700 m, with the maximum recorded depth of one individual being 1,018 m! Elder females lead pods within which members form extremely strong bonds with one another, and females often outnumber males 8:1.

Pilot whales were considered as a “data deficient” species in the Red List of Threatened species in 2008, due to a lack of research. Like most ocean organisms, short-finned pilot whales are impacted by anthropogenic threats. One of these is the accidental ingestion of plastic; in June 2018 a dying male pilot whale was discovered in a canal in Thailand with 80 plastic bags and other plastic debris weighing up to 8 kg found in its stomach. This highlights the critical importance of keeping our oceans clean and healthy, especially since we hope to continue seeing these beautiful animals in Sogod Bay!

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)