



## ***The ICRAN Mesoamerican Reef Alliance Promoting Sustainable Tourism along the Mesoamerican Reef By the Coral Reef Alliance***

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The Mesoamerican Reef (MAR) is an astoundingly diverse, unique, and yet fragile marine ecosystem located in the western reaches of the Caribbean Sea. A string of barrier and fringing reefs, atolls and patch corals, lagoons, sea grass beds, and mangroves, the MAR stretches more than 620 miles (1,000 kilometers) from the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico through the barrier reefs of Belize and Guatemala to the Bay Islands of Honduras.

The MAR supports more than 66 coral and 500 fish species, many of which are protected through a network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) along the shores that front the reef. Many of these MPAs, which seek to protect the biological and cultural diversity found along the reef, are recognised as World Heritage Sites. These critical reef ecosystems provide habitat for countless marine species, and serve as a vital natural resource for coastal communities throughout the region, supporting major fisheries and local food supplies, affording coastal protection from storms, and fueling a robust and growing marine tourism industry.

Culminating in 2007, the ICRAN Mesoamerican Reef Alliance (ICRAN MAR) represents an ambitious initiative to improve environmental business practices that minimise impacts along the MAR by galvanising the tourism sector to become a leading advocate for reef conservation throughout the region. By taking a holistic conservation approach through the implementation of fisheries, watershed management, and tourism components,

the initiative has begun addressing the most significant threats to the MAR while simultaneously supporting the region's economic future.

As the lead organisation implementing the sustainable tourism component of the ICRAN MAR initiative, the Coral Reef Alliance (CORAL) partnered with the World Wildlife Fund and the United Nations Environment Program to engage the marine tourism and conservation sectors with three primary objectives:

- Develop the world's first voluntary environmental performance standards for marine recreation providers through a highly participatory process;
- Catalyse conservation alliances that fundamentally improve relationships between private sector and resource managers;
- Develop business-to-business alliances throughout the tourism supply chain that support best environmental practices.

The overarching objective of the tourism component of the ICRAN MAR initiative was to reduce local recreational impacts to coral reefs and build human resources and capacity for economically and environmentally sustainable communities.

The work of CORAL and its partners has fostered regional implementation of good environmental business practices in the marine tourism sector and multiple conservation initiatives that support effectively managed marine parks and previously unseen conservation

partnerships from local to regional scales. Engaging local governments and communities, marine recreation providers, cruise lines, and concerned citizens to take ownership of this initiative has been a critical component in achieving long-term success.

### **Response and Accomplishments**

CORAL promotes conservation through its [Coral Reef Sustainable Destination](#) (CRSD) approach, a holistic model that combines marine area management and sustainable business operation for community benefit. The CRSD model is designed to rapidly and effectively harness community action as it builds a new economic reality whereby sustainable business practices and direct conservation are linked with new opportunities, better fishing, and preserved cultural identity. Some recent accomplishments in Mesoamerica include:

### **Voluntary Standards for Marine Recreation in the MAR System**

CORAL facilitated a highly participatory process to develop the world's first [Voluntary Standards](#) for Marine Recreation in the MAR System - Scuba Diving Services, Snorkeling Services, and Recreational Boat Operations. Participants were located across the four countries of Mesoamerica and included marine tour operator associations, park managers and conservation NGOs, the cruise ship industry, scientists, and concerned divers. In July 2006, the Voluntary Standards were unanimously approved, and then published in May 2007. To date, there is widespread support for standards implementation in the region, and with continued education and training on sustainable tourism and reef conservation issues, region-wide implementation is gradually becoming a reality.



### **Training and Education in Sustainable Marine Recreation**

To increase best environmental business practices of marine tourism professionals, **CORAL** has conducted trainings in multiple destinations throughout Mexico, Belize, and Honduras since 2005. The initial workshop, 'Sustainable Marine Recreation: Protect Your Business by Protecting Your Reefs', represents CORAL's efforts to increase awareness and begin the process of altering attitudes and changing behaviors. Marine tourism participants indicate significant benefit from the opportunity to interact and discuss conservation and sustainability topics with their peers and reef managers.



The second workshop, 'Conservation in Action', built on interest and momentum generated from the Sustainable Marine Recreation training. Conservation in Action was designed to return to the local reef threats identified by participants in the previous workshop, and then identify, plan, and implement local community-based conservation projects to reduce these threats. CORAL's role is to facilitate and act as a catalyst for this local conservation action. Our experience has proven the tremendous potential for positive conservation impact and reduced reef threats from such community-driven projects. Due to the success of these workshops, two additional project sites were added in 2006, significantly increasing region-wide engagement with the marine tourism sector.

### Microgrant Funding for Local Conservation

As an incentive to launch practical and realistic community-based projects generated by Conservation in Action workshops, CORAL provides microgrants to fund select community-driven projects that aim to reduce local reef threats, build alliances, and support effective management of marine resources. In Mesoamerica, the following initiatives have grown from this workshop series:

- Marine Park Infrastructure Improvements in Roatan - Community leaders in Roatan, Honduras, have strengthened the marine infrastructure of the Roatan Marine Park, and raised operational standards through the implementation of rules and guidelines and improvement of facilities.
- Mooring Buoy Installation - Several groups ("Mooring Masters") in Mexico, Belize, and Honduras have initiated and continue to maintain mooring buoy programs. In addition, these projects have also encouraged the adoption of good business practices; fostered alliances between marine recreation businesses, the local communities, and MPA resource managers; and have greatly improved management practices within marine reserves.
- Kids in Action: Education for Maintaining Healthy Reefs - Community members in San Pedro Town, Belize, are raising awareness of the economic and ecological value of local protected areas (Hol Chan and Bacalar Chico Marine Reserves), and ways to maintain healthy coral reefs through outreach activities, field trips, and beach cleanups of local marine reserves. These activities are allowing the children of the community to participate in local stewardship and witness natural wonders first hand.
- Raising Awareness and Ownership for

Cozumel Island Community - Project leaders have worked to create a sense of ownership and pride within the community for the coral reefs of Cozumel, through a series of workshops, seminars, radio PSAs, and a beautiful public video featuring a local girl as the character of a mermaid.



### The Sustainable Marine Recreation Environmental Walk-Through Program

As an outgrowth to the success of the standards development process, CORAL partnered with Conservation International (CI) to develop the 'Sustainable Marine Recreation Environmental Walk-Through Program (EWT)'. The aim of EWT is to advise marine recreation businesses on improving their environmental practices. CORAL, in collaboration with CI, developed a tool to assess business performance in areas such as policies and management plans, staff training, effective management of tours and visitors, raising environmental awareness among visitors, minimising impacts and contributing to conservation of the site.

CORAL supports local businesses by providing the opportunity to identify gaps in environmental performance based on widely recognised good practices codified in the standards. Once a business has completed a performance assessment, CORAL provides recommendations, along with tools, technical assistance, and training on sustainable marine recreation practices. Additionally, CORAL collaborates with businesses in building the program over time, not only to maximise buy-in and adoption of best practices, but also to capitalise on the expertise that

operators have in their field. To bring a supply chain approach to the program and create incentives for participating businesses, CI is engaging the cruise line sector to build a business-to-business performance assessment tool.

By early 2008, several businesses in Mexico and Belize have been assessed and are demonstrating implementation of standards and good practices. As proof of concept, three companies in Cozumel, Mexico, which collectively carry more than 75,000 tourists into the Cozumel National Marine Park each year, are rewriting company policy manuals to incorporate requirements from the marine recreation standards related to staff training, visitor management and briefings, and operation of vessels. CORAL acknowledges this as a significant indicator of early willingness to reassess the business-as-usual mentality in favor of reef (and ultimately, business) sustaining practices.

### What's Next?

Fresh from the conservation success of the last four years, CORAL has leaped to the next set of projects and challenges in its quest to realise a sustainable marine tourism environment for the MAR. In addition to ongoing traction and leveraging ICRAN MAR success in the Caribbean, it has been proven that the voluntary standards development process piloted along the MAR has portability and value in other coral destinations. The State of Hawaii, encouraged by outcomes demonstrated by the ICRAN MAR project, has engaged CORAL in a similar standards development process on the islands of Maui and Hawaii.

Ultimately, the hallmark of a successful program is that competencies and lessons learned can be transported and shared broadly. By such a metric, the investments in the ICRAN MAR continue to pay significant dividends.

- The EWT Program launch in Belize in 2008.
- Implementation of the Voluntary Standards - the project is well poised to institutionalise the standards throughout the MAR region.
- New microgrants for additional mooring buoy installation, MPA infrastructure support, and other conservation initiatives.
- Expansion of project sites throughout the MAR and the training workshops.

For more information contact:  
The Coral Reef Alliance (CORAL)  
351 California Street, Suite 650  
San Francisco, CA 94104  
Phone: +1 (415) 834-0900  
<http://www.coral.org>  
[info@coral.org](mailto:info@coral.org)

