



Topic: Coral Reef Conservation Contributing to the effective management of the Mesoamerican Reef

The Mesoamerican reef region nurtured ancient cultures that understood the value of cooperative living and working. Today 67 local, national and international conservation, research, private and government agencies have come together to form the Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative to conserve the Mesoamerican Reef - the first effort of its kind to collectively and qualitatively assess reef health in biennial Report Cards, including science-based management recommendations and the tracking of these actions through regional Eco-Audits.

In the last five years, six new marine protected areas (MPAs) were designated (47 total), but more importantly the area under full protection from all fishing increased 61% to over 1,900 km² since 2011. Some of these fully protected areas have ten times more fish biomass than fished areas.

Our corals also survived the 2015/16 coral bleaching that affected about 40% of colonies. Live coral continues to remain around 17% with some sites having 60% live coral cover - the highest ever found in the Caribbean (Tela and Cordelia, in Honduras), and some others with 30% coral cover of the important reef builder elkhorn coral (*Acropora palmata*) in sites like Limones, Mexico (Quintana Roo). Other success stories include the 2015 parrotfish protection in Guatemala, and Belize's Coastal Zone Management plan approved as well as ending the open access fisheries, both in 2016.

The Mesoamerican reef faces the same threats as most reefs worldwide including inadequate water treatment and coastal development among the most pressing ones – but this reef is holding its own, increasing slowly in health, giving us hope - due to the collective and coordinated science based management actions being taken. However, we need to increase the pace of management compared to the accelerated population growth that increases the threats faced by the reef. Coordinated science-based management actions have helped educate about the importance of protecting this amazing reef, making new MPAs in spawning aggregation sites, and protecting parrotfish to reduce harmful macroalgae are clear examples of successful reef management.

The collaborative process of producing Report Cards on the health of the reef, followed by evaluation of management actions (Eco-Audits), provides a valuable system for catalyzing public awareness, tracking progress and accelerating improved reef management on a large scale.

Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative (HRI)

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