

## Coral Conservation & Volunteer Diving

*Words by Matt Doggett & Pete Mandara. Photos by Matt Doggett (unless stated)*

“Please, please! Me, me!” voices shout as I leave the cool sea for the searing midday sun in Sogod Bay, Southern Leyte. Several happy, smiling kids want to carry my mask and fins up the beach to the grassy, kitting-up area. I’m leaving a rich, underwater paradise behind and entering a poor, coastal community dominated by fragile homes and palm trees. Much of the community relies on the sea’s resources for their livelihood but the sea is under pressure, and that’s why we’re diving.



*Ian - always available for fun and games.*

Coral Cay Conservation (CCC) is an award winning, not-for-profit conservation organisation dedicated to the protection, restoration and management of coral reefs around the World, for the benefit of local coast communities that depend on them. By training non-divers and teaching experienced divers science, surveying methods and environmental responsibility, CCC is able initiate and achieve pragmatic marine conservation in many developing nations.

With a pioneering, multi-stakeholder (governments, non governmental organisations (NGOs) local businesses and local communities) and ‘citizen’ science approach, CCC initiates long-term conservation management plans for all those with a personal stake in the coral; most notably, the millions of the world’s poorest coastal dwellers that depend almost entirely on reef resources for their food, shelter and income.

Since its inception in 1986, CCC has become a recognised and respected leader in the field of coral reef conservation. CCC has worked in 12 countries, proposing and designating marine protected areas (MPAs) and wildlife sanctuaries and most notably a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Belize. Most recently in Limasawa, Philippines, CCC, German Technical Corporations (GTZ) and the local municipality celebrated the opening of the first ever MPA for Limasawa. The MPA



*A false clown anemone fish – a well-known reef inhabitant.*



*Long-finned trevallies - a species valued by the community that will benefit from protected areas.*

is situated in the northeast of the island; it is the largest MPA in Southern Leyte and one of the largest scattered amongst the Philippines' 7,107 islands.

CCC's expeditions have both scientific and community elements. The primary aim is to generate detailed information on the marine biodiversity and conservation value of the coastal zones. These surveys involve a team of divers counting everything they see as they swim along pre-determined survey lines. The information gathered is used to produce maps displaying areas of

high conservation value. These maps can be used in marine spatial planning, such as establishing MPAs.

CCC also surveys existing MPAs in the locality of the expedition and reports the results to the local fishing communities and local authorities enhancing public understanding of CCC's work. Since the expedition in Southern Leyte in the Philippines began in 2002, CCC has been instrumental in establishing five new MPAs and monitoring their success. Early indications suggest that local fishermen are proud to be the guardians of their protected areas and believe their catches have improved as a result.

Community education is a vital part of all CCC expeditions; only by encouraging the local people to understand the importance and fragility of the reef ecosystem can any expedition stand a chance of long-term success. To this end, CCC's track record is excellent. Expedition staff and volunteers often make visits to local schools and colleges to hold special marine awareness classes for students of all

ages. Open days are also held at the CCC expedition base involving both classroom and practical, hands-on lessons where students can snorkel on the local reefs and see the ecosystem they are learning about first hand.



*Reef Rangers from the local school after finishing their second reef survey.*

CCC teacher training events allow CCC scientists to inform science teachers from across the province about marine biology and pressing environmental issues. The teachers leave the events armed with lesson plans and activities to use in school and pass the message on to students across the region.

Recently, CCC scientists have forged links with Southern Leyte State University and the staff and students of its new Marine Biology degree course. As part of this relationship, students from the degree course are awarded scholarships with CCC. Scholarship allows a student to join the expedition for a full month during which time they learn to SCUBA dive and how to conduct underwater surveys. With this scheme in place, local capacity to guard and monitor the reefs will remain when the expedition eventually moves on.



CCC volunteers with a bilingual interpretation board and a batch of MPA marker buoys.



Descending through myriad fish on the wall at Napantao.

There were too many highlights during my time in the Philippines to name just one. It would be wrong to ignore the coral reefs for they are truly amazing. The present House Reef at Napantao lies adjacent to Napantao Marine Sanctuary. The sanctuary has been described as one of the finest wall dives in the Philippines. Two sheer walls covered in soft and hard corals drop to over 40m, separated by a steep bank. The descent

takes you through tens of thousands of anthias, damselfish and wrasse. Turtles are frequent as well as lionfish, six-bar and emperor angelfish and groupers. Further out into the blue, tuna, jack and barracuda patrol the wall and at the right time of year whale sharks will be passing close by.

The whale sharks really were enormous and can be seen at Sonok Point between November and February. These graceful beasts are shy and divers and snorkellers should respect the Code of Conduct outlined by the Shark Trust; remain at least 3 m from the sharks and refrain from flash photography. I found that snorkelling allowed me to spend longer with the sharks than any of the scuba divers.



*Dancing the Tinikling for the crowd in Padre Burgos. (Photo: Ron Parkes)*

Community highlights were many. Soon after I arrived, the local Mayor asked me if a group of us would perform the national dance, the Tinikling, in front of the townspeople; a daunting prospect if ever there was one. Of course we accepted. Then we found out the dance involved jumping between large bamboo sticks in bare feet whilst they were smacked together in rhythm! Three weeks and several sore ankles later we gave a flawless (well almost!) performance for a

1000+ capacity crowd, to rapturous applause.

At Christmas we held a party for the youngest children from the surrounding villages. Usually open days were educational but this one was all about having fun and making staff and volunteers look silly. The day was a resounding success although the mobbing of Santa Claus resulted in evacuation of the beach shack as it cracked under the weight of the children rushing for presents!

That leads to the best highlight which for me was the Filipino people. Everyone I had the pleasure to work with was courteous and friendly with a warm welcome. The children yearned to be taught and loved to play and enjoy life. I left the Philippines with many happy memories and knowledge that the continuing work of CCC has a real impact on the ground, touching the lives of many.



*It's all about the kids! (Photo: Hew Hamilton)*