



EXPEDITION DIARY Honduras 2008

By Jon Shrives

6 March

Hello everyone and welcome to the Honduras 2008 diary. I'm Jon, your expedition leader, and you will be hearing from me regularly over the next few weeks. Kathy and I are just getting ready here in England, ready for the off in a couple of days. All if things go to plan of course!

Anyway, I look forward to meeting you in La Ceiba soon. My Honduras mobile number (FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY OR IF YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE LATE FOR ASSEMBLY) is +504 9842810 and I'll see you at the Banana Republic.

If you are still trying to swot up for the expedition, remember to read the published reports from previous expeditions available via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/reports.

So long

Jon Shrives
Expedition leader

12 March

Just thought I'd send out a quick update now we've arrived on the island. We arrived in Cayos Cochinos very early on Monday morning, after a long journey from Heathrow to Miami, Miami to San Pedro Sula in Honduras, and then a night time dash in a pick-up truck down to the coastal port of La Ceiba. You will all be glad to hear that all the travelling is well worth it. As I sit here now writing this e-mail the brilliant morning sun is trickling through the gently swaying leaves of the palm trees on this idyllic Island. The science station you will be calling home for twelve days is situated on a lovely sweeping sandy bay, dotted by coconut palms and lapped by a beautiful turquoise Caribbean. Equally the sky is now a clear pale blue, marked only by a few misty clouds clinging to the mountainous coastline of mainland Honduras. A stark difference to the rainy, cold England I left behind only a few days ago!

I hope all your last minute preparations are going ok – some of you may want to bring out a couple of dive torches (one main, plus one back up) in case you fancy a night dive. There is a good possibility that if enough people are interested, we may be able to cram in a night dive on the local reefs – certainly a site to behold. Also make sure you bring long sleeve shirts, trousers and insect repellent – we had a bit of rain here a few days ago and the sand flies can be quite aggressive!

Also on the Island is Kathy, who works for Biosphere too, and together with Velvet, (the expedition's dive instructor) we've been finalising the dive sites and survey schedule for the next few weeks. On Friday, Kathy and I will travel back over to La Ceiba to finalise some paperwork and do a bit of shopping. For the Slot One team, Kathy and I will be hanging around the Banana Republic Guesthouse at 7-7:15pm on Saturday night, looking for company to join us for dinner! Otherwise the official meeting / start of the expedition is at 6:40 am on the Sunday morning. Apologies for the early start – but I promise it's the earliest one you have to deal with for the whole expedition! The reason for such an early start is the need to get on the boat nice and early, so as to have a nice smooth crossing over to the island.

Otherwise we're all looking forward to meeting you and getting on with doing some great diving and surveys! Hope the packing goes well, and stay tuned for another update on Friday! Buena suerte!

15 March

Just a little update from Kathy and myself. We are now over in La Ceiba and having finished our last bits of paperwork and shopping, we are looking forward to rendezvousing with the Slot One team. Last night Kathy and I checked out the 'Expatriate's Bar', where we will be having dinner tonight. It's a great place with a great atmosphere and a good selection of food - most of which is home grown by the owners or their friends. However we have been warned by one of the owners that the price of salad may go up soon. Apparently their main supplier was keeping a female jaguar on the farm in a converted macaw aviary! Of course the weight of an amorous male jaguar looking for a date, is a bit more than your average macaw, and so a breakout was facilitated! As you can imagine, the farmer and his staff are now a bit nervous to venture out into the fields now that they have two jaguars wondering around. Biosphere have several jaguar projects in other countries (www.biosphere-expeditions.org), but unfortunately Honduras isn't one of them! So for the meantime we'll keep the focus on reef conservation and assessment!

17 March

Hello again everyone! You'll be glad to hear that all the slot one team made it safely to the rendezvous on Sunday morning, regardless of jaguar breakouts! We had a good trip over to the island. The morning mist was just clinging to the mountains on the coast, otherwise it was a clear day with a smooth sea. Once we arrived, the team settled in and proceeded upstairs to the restaurant for a welcome brief, introduction and safety talk.

The team then regrouped in the dry lab for an introductory lecture on coral reef ecology, followed by lunch. The afternoon we went over the Reef Check methodology, which involved watching the Reef Check instructional video featuring the now legendary Craig from Reef Check – "Outstanding!", who is a firm favourite amongst Biosphere Expedition teams. The video was followed by the traditional beach practice transect, involving a special guest appearance by a duck tape denizen of the deep! Dive gear was then issued as required, and after a long day, the team relaxed on the veranda of the hut, sipping a nice cold (and well earned!) beer.

The next day we awoke to a very exciting boa spotting. The Cayos Cochinos are home to the endemic pink boa constrictor, a rare variation of the mainland boas, which are normally a greeny-grey to brownish colour. This snake can only be found on these two islands, and nowhere else in the world! Often scientists spend days in the local forest, hoping to find one. We found two sitting in the tree next to the hut, just on the way up to breakfast! We were then treated to a presentation about the history of the region by Adoni Cubas, the Director of Conservation for the foundation that manages the marine park. We also had a presentation from Tony Ives, founder and Director of the Development Support Group (GAD – Grupo Apoyo y Desarrollo) – a relatively new NGO, that has set up in the region to help local communities with sustainable development projects and education scholarships. Their website is <http://cayoscholarships.org/> for those interested in more information. It was really exciting and encouraging to hear the progress that is being made in the region. The rest of the morning was spent in identification lectures, as the team honed their skills in anticipation of practice surveys tomorrow.

We did, however, take a break from lectures in the afternoon, with an opportunity to get wet! The team visited Pelican Point 3 – a gentle, shallow dive site with some nice patch reefs and bombies. The site was ideal for a check dive and the reefscape was perfect for practicing identification following this morning's lectures.

23 March

Hello everyone! Sorry for the delay in the latest diary, but we've suffered a patch of bad weather and limited connectivity to the web. After initial Reef Check training for two days, the team started their first day of data collection. The previous day we all had a practice dive on the warm, shallow reef flat of Pelican Point Buoy 4, and so everyone was now settled into their specific roles. Steve and I started first, laying the 100 m transect tape, then returning to the start, to count indicator species of reef fish. We were then followed by Yvonne and Lydia collecting invertebrate data and our Gorgonian 'counter-in-chief'; Kathy. Last, but by no means least; we have Savanna and Velvet assessing the substratum that comprises the reef itself. The team has been collecting data like a well oiled machine, but sadly dives have been interrupted for the last couple of days, by a series of unusual cold fronts causing bad weather. However bad weather and cancelled dives have not interrupted the slot one team's adventures!

The station now has its own herpetologist, Lesley, who is out here studying the local black-chested ctenosaur (looks like an iguana, but I'm told by Lesley it's definitely not an iguana!). Lesley employed the services of our team, thinking up elaborate ways to catch the surprisingly agile reptiles! Unfortunately one of the larger ctenosaurs managed to give Lesley a nasty bite on her thumb, and the team had to suspend catching activities to do a bit of first aid. A couple of stitches and a thumb splint later, Lesley and Kathy were gallantly leading the team over the top of the island to explore the remote and untouched beach on the other side. The trek took the best part of the afternoon, with the team finding all sorts of interesting creatures in the rock pools of the other beach. Now the weather has cleared up, and we have sprung back into action with some back to back diving, increasing the sample rate to three dives a day, making up for lost time! Today we lost Kathy and Lydia from the team. Kathy is returning back to the Biosphere office in the sunny UK and will be sorely missed by everyone. Lydia who was visiting Velvet, had been drafted (press-ganged!) into working with us, and has been a key ally. Although we've been spoilt by having two extra pairs of hands on the dives, we are still raring to go, and our spirits have been lifted today, by the kind donation of chocolate Easter bunnies, flown in all the way from Austria by Yvonne! So Buena viaje Kathy and Lydia and Happy Easter to everyone too!

26 March

Well we've been dogged by bad weather again! But it hasn't deterred the Slot 1 team one bit! Although we lost a day of diving yesterday, the team has made up for it with some extra dives today. Even with all this work going on, we've still had the chance to see some great reef life whilst diving. On the day that Kathy and Lydia left, we performed two survey dives (no time off, when making up the dives missed due to bad weather!). On the first dive, we had enough spare time to explore 'El Avión' the namesake of this site. Lying just off the reef is a small twin engine Cessna plane wreck, which crashed at the site in the mid 1990s.

Many a story abounds about the wreck's origins and reasons for crashing. Tales vary from drug trafficking, to aerial surveys for the United States Geological Survey, to rumours of CIA involvement! All depending on which divemaster you ask, of course! If exploring the now coral encrusted wreck wasn't exciting enough for one dive. We were then greeted by a wonderful formation of eight Caribbean reef squid, performing a fine multi-coloured underwater ballet for us. Being somewhat of self-confessed cephalopod geek, I couldn't believe my luck; I've only seen reef squid twice before in 500 dives within the marine park. Far rarer than turtles – which we see all the time (unless you're Kathy, in which case they tend to hide from you. Sorry Kathy!).

As if that wasn't enough for the team and I, we were treated to something really unusual on our second dive of the day, at the dive site 'Arena'. There at the end of our fish transect, Steve and I stumbled upon a real oddity and photographic opportunity; an octopus, out in the open (they're normally tucked away in a crevice during the day), bold as blue, eating a queen conch! The canny creature had turned the gigantic snail on its back, and was merrily chomping away at the soft underside.

When disturbed, the octopus dragged the conch back to the lair, using it as composite shield and living larder! Our series of underwater adventures was ultimately topped off last night, when on a night dive in the local bay, Steve and Savanna's torches attracted in a school of eagle rays, who gently glided in to inspect these strange bubbly creatures. All Savanna and Steve could do was gaze back in awe, as the rays cruised into within a meter of the divers, chomping away at small fish and jellies on the way!

27 March

Hello again everyone. I just wanted to send out a quick note to let the incoming Slot Two Team know that I will be in La Ceiba again this Saturday and hanging around Banana Republic Guesthouse at 7:15 pm local time, if anyone fancies meeting up for a pre-expedition dinner. Otherwise the Expedition will officially start at 6:30 am on the Sunday morning at the Banana Republic, where we will all meet up with the Honduran Coral Reef Foundation's truck to load up our luggage for our trip to the dock and then onwards to Cayos Cochinos! Again if anyone needs to contact me in an emergency (i.e. problems meeting up or you will be late for assembly on the Sunday morning), then my cell number is: (+504) 99842810. Otherwise I look forward to meeting the Slot Two team this weekend! I hope you all have a good flight over and please feel free to bring dive torches for a night dive. Buen Viaje!

30 March 2008

¡Hola! You'll be glad to know the Slot 2 team have successfully made it out to the island. We had a smooth crossing, where, despite having done the La Ceiba to Cayos route countless times over the last few years, the only person who got wet was yours truly!

After a day of briefings and introductions to the Reef Check method for surveying coral reef health, the team are now settling in to their new Caribbean home. We've had great weather the last few days, which has been a welcomed return to the norm after the Slot 1 team's unlucky rainy patch. Tomorrow the team continues training with a three hour session on identification followed by a check dive in the afternoon. Team 'Buffs' and T-Shirts have been issued and already people are keen to get out diving and collecting data. This enthusiasm combined with the good weather forecast (keep your fingers crossed!) bodes well for the next 12 days of the expedition, and there is a lively atmosphere of anticipation and excitement on the island.

I'm now off to watch the Biosphere Expeditions versus Honduran all-stars, volleyball match, which has just started. Although the Honduran staff have the home field advantage, we have a secret weapon; Lesley the herpetologist has played professionally and at international level, so we might be in with a chance! Stay tuned for more news from the field within the next few days. ¡Hasta luego!

6 April

The Team has seen and done a lot since my last entry!

We returned to Cayo Timon (site of the hawksbill turtle and self-publicising stingray) to conduct another survey dive, this time at a slightly deeper depth. Halfway through the transect, Roland and Anna spotted a huge adult hawksbill sitting on the crest, contently watching us swim up and down laying transect tapes. In contrast to the previous turtle, this adult had obviously seen it all before and wasn't fazed by divers snapping away with their cameras. As if that close encounter wasn't exciting enough, the second dive of the day was even more exhilarating. After laying down the transect tape at the dive site 'Peli 2', Dominik and Tom spotted something distinctly not reef shaped, sticking out of the rocks. Suddenly I heard them signalling me, both clanging on their tanks. I turned around to see what all the commotion was about. In a blur of bubbles, they were both making a hand signal that all divers hope to see. A hand signal that is sadly all too infrequent these days; one I had longed for since 2004. There was no mistaking their gestures, as they frantically hit top-centre of their heads in a vertical palm salute.

The mock dorsal fin signal could mean only one thing: shark! Sure enough, in a small sandy hole on the reef below, a nurse shark had curled up for a daytime nap. Fast asleep, the shark did not care a bit as we all crowded in to take pictures. You could practically hear it snoring underwater! We were ecstatic! Shark numbers are seriously threatened globally and they are in danger of extinction, mainly due to the shark finning trade. For example; we have seen three turtles here in the last week. In 500 dives within Cayos Cochinos over the last six years, I have only ever seen two other nurse sharks! It was a real treat!

The next day was reasonably uneventful in comparison. Plenty of data collected though, and with the good weather we've had, we are actually ahead of schedule! Time enough for a night dive! The team visited the dive site 'Arena'; so called for its round stadium-like shape. With the torches briefly switched off, the team experienced the bioluminescence, their movements exciting the glowing plankton in the water. Sleeping parrotfish and huge wandering lobsters also impressed the team. One of the most beautiful sites was the elegant and delicate basket stars, roaming slowly over the reef, wafting their giant fern-like arms in an attempt to catch a night time snack.

Today the team is off for a well deserved break. This afternoon we'll visit the local Garifuna communities in Cayo Chachahuate and the east end of Cayo Major (the big island opposite the island we are based on.) to see how the local fishermen live and view successful community development projects, such as extensions to the local school and construction of the new ecotourism lodges.

It's back to work tomorrow. We only have three more days for the last few data collection dives, before we pack up for our departure. We wouldn't mind seeing another shark before then though!

10 April

Well, sadly this is my last diary entry from Cayos Cochinos, as the expedition comes to an end. Today has mostly been spent packing as we have a very early departure tomorrow morning! Yesterday was our last day of diving, and due to the team's eagerness, we were ahead of schedule with data collection. This meant we had all day free to do some fun dives and explore some other dive sites around the region. First thing in the morning we ventured out to 'Peli 1'. Part of the 'Peli' series of sites (you might recall diary entries about Peli 4 and Peli 0), this site boasts a breath-taking sheer wall, that drops down to 30 meters. The team just roamed around the top 18 meters though, admiring the myriad of fish life swarming around the delicate branching corals of the reef crest. This was followed by a dive off Cayo Largo Arriba, a relatively un-explored site in the east of the marine park. Here the team discovered a huge underwater bank, covered in corals and algae – completely unexpected! Even though the team saw yet another turtle (they're a lucky lot the slot two team!), the highlight was a very up-close and personal encounter with an eagle ray. Completely unafraid, this magnificent spotted giant, cruised within feet of the team, circled around us for a good look and then majestically glided off into the deep! What a way to end the expedition! In the evening we celebrated with a tense, yet hilarious game of volleyball, where Dominik proved once and for all, the Swiss are very good at bobsleigh and skiing, but not so great at beach volleyball! He did make up for it in buckets of enthusiasm though. At the post-volleyball party, we celebrated our successful data collection with a little treat – I'd squirreled away some chilled white wine, some red wine and a jar of olives! Needless to say, all was gobbled up by the team pretty quickly!

Well with packing almost done, its time to pop over to the hotel on the larger island for some R&R followed by a surprise cake I've order for the team's last dinner this evening!

Thank you again everyone for all your help, enthusiasm, humour and hard work. It's been a great month and you can all be proud of what we have achieved here. Perhaps see you again some day, if not same place next year?

Hasta luego

Jon