

Biosphere Reef Check Malaysia Expedition 2013

Tioman Island 10th to 22nd March



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I came across Biosphere expeditions on the Reef Check site and having grown up in conservation but being disconnected for so many years I was inspired by an opportunity to do something about it.

Biosphere Expeditions is a not-for-profit participatory conservation organisation offering hands-on wildlife volunteer expeditions as an adventure with a purpose for everyone. A quick scout proved a serious reputation with many awards and their founder nominated as one of the top 50 to watch in the UK.

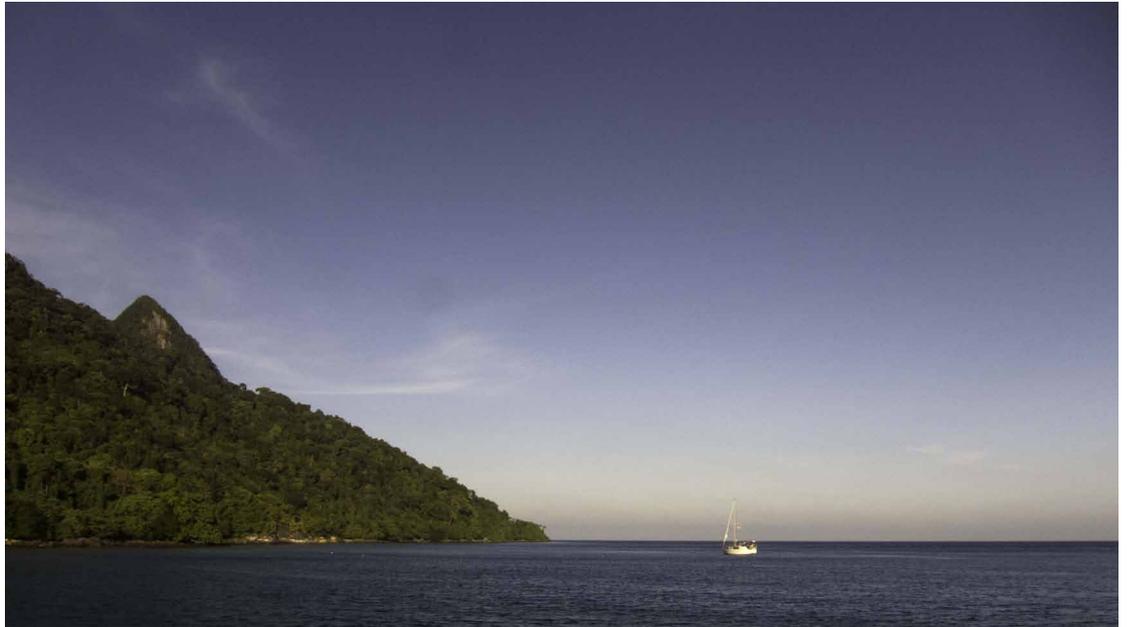
The Malaysia expedition teams up with Reef Check Malaysia, part of the world's largest international coral reef monitoring programme involving volunteer recreational divers and marine scientists who based on data collected in over 80 countries, delivered the first scientific documentation of the dramatic worldwide decline in coral reef health over the years 2002 - 2007.

To spend 2 weeks diving for scientific data to hopefully influence decision making on the protection of coral reefs, a very sensitive barometer of the rainforests and the planet has to be a worthwhile investment. We joined the 1st of 2 groups for the Reef Check 2013 scientific expeditions 10 - 22 March.



The sign up went easy until I received a request to courier a 5kg package to the team leader. After agreeing I made a remark that couriers to Malaysia didn't have a good reputation, this and the fact that our booking would have us arriving 2 hours late for our 09:00 muster got the boss a little hot under the collar. A few misguided emails and I had to make a decision.





The problems continued with my flight back from Bari on the Thursday before our departure being cancelled. The alternate flight would not get me back in time so I had to take an alternate to Milan then on by train arriving back in Zug in time to quickly pack and onto the airport.

8th March: The next steps were uneventful until I got locked out the bathroom in Kuala Lumpur and the taxi got a flat on the journey to the airport. The picture below left is misty because of the fog on my lens obviously in response to minus something °C in Zug and plus plenty with humidity to match in KL

"Hi team, here is a quick request for group 1 from the forward party on Tioman. Could you please bring (in the luggage that you check in, not your hand luggage) a small bottle of eucalyptus oil or tea tree oil. Also, if you see Miltons tablets (for sterilizing baby bottles) or Detol, please bring this in your checked luggage too. All this is to wash research gear on the voyage and we can't get the above items on the island. If group 1 brings the stuff, we should have plenty for the whole expedition.

Thanks

Paul"

All good we arrived by turbo prop on Tioman at the adjusted kick off time of 11:00am. We still had to get to Swiss Cottages arriving just

We were obviously dealing with an organization who were serious about their scientific aims and the safety and satisfaction of the team they had employed. Our objective hadn't changed and there was a clear misunderstanding about our intent so we dug in and joined.... Fortunately.



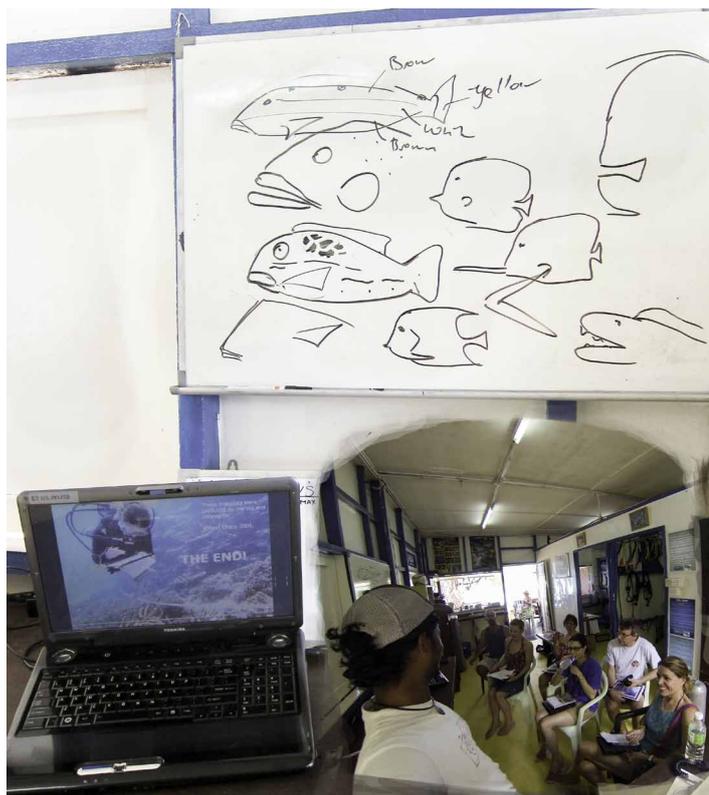
30 mins late for the first meeting!

The expedition leader Paul o'Dowd a lifetime in nature & the dive industry, Great Barrier Reef, Papua New Guinea etc. Paul was a great choice to lead our program always aware of our needs and those of the mission. Great to talk to and he is very keen to share his passions in rainforest ecology, conservation and sustainability, documentaries and Toxoplasmosis! Especially necessary for the risk assessment and all the cats on site!

Alvin Chelliah our scientist - a master's degree in marine science and a Programme Manager with Reef Check Malaysia. He was absolutely committed to the role and tailor made for the task of teaching and enlightening us slow learners. His skills as a dive master were always evident as he guided safety and marshalled us as a team above and under water. We were very lucky to have him, thanks Prof!

Onshore dive support was provided by Tioman Dive Centre (TDC) magic team under Rosie (with Claire, Neil, Wa, Mann, Nolan from Durban doing his dive master training) Part of the TDC team is Chris the skipper of the Araliya another Aussie, full of fun & stories. Then running Swiss Cottages Richard and Stella.

The rest of the mob were a diverse bunch but



what a team! Liz a doctor working in Scotland with addicts, Hermine a French midwife working in London with a very talented artist Dad.. Gail an American lady turning over a new tree and relocating to the hills then Cathy and I.

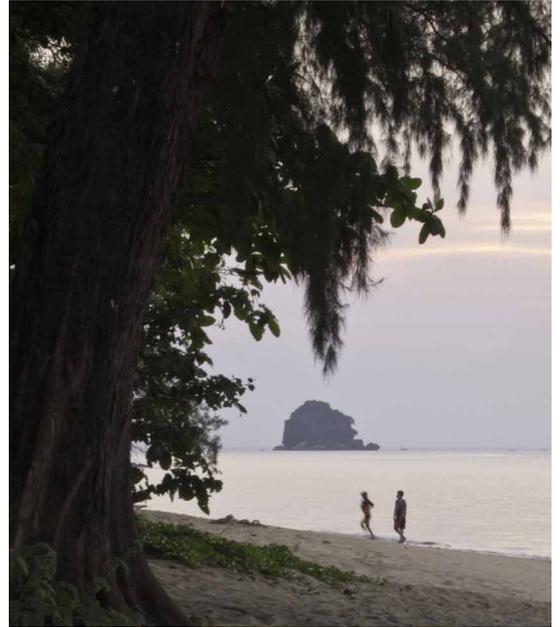
10th March: After the initial meeting and risk assessment session we dived the house reef for some buoyancy testing. Essential skills if you are going to be hunting for invertebrates without touching, bumping or destroying the reef and your body! Sadly this was also going to be the birth of the silver turtle bay when Cathy lost her ear ring mastering the skills.

11th March: School with the Prof, learning the fish and invertebrate indicator species and a "pointy" dive on Pirate just around from the marina and Renggis a small island in front of the Berjaya resort. Cool spot, great quality

coral. We saw turtle, white tip reef shark, file fish and of course lots of the indicator and “close” resemblances like the crescent (moon) wrasse and vermiculated angelfish. Spotting a snapper is a bit trickier than we thought, no fork tails just grumpy mouths!

12th March: More school with substrates, hard, soft coral, recently killed coral, nutrient indicating algae. Lots to learn about differentiating, what causes bleaching, etc. Then two dives on the house reef testing our ID skills. We also found a nesting cuttlefish trying to keep us away from her nest by sitting still some distance away. The eggs were nestled safely in an old “bommy” of branching coral. Fish exam!

13th March: On the beach practicing some of the methods we saw a sea eagle take a sea snake a couple of times. On the first attempt the team tried to save the snake and found it had eggs and set it back “safely” into the sea, but only a few minutes later was taken again, dropped, taken again. Who can explain that?! Our first mock survey followed on the house reef, several “million” diadema urchin shows the strains of higher than normal nutrient levels.



Not all bad though, nice emperor angel and giant clam also.

“The team has spent the last few days in intensive training for their data collection duties on the Reef Check surveys they are about to become involved with. The exams that they are currently completing will establish the confidence levels that the scientist, Alvin, will need to have in order to be certain that the data collected are useful. It is a bit hard sitting in the classroom pouring over books with the sound of the South China Sea lapping the shore only meters away...”

Substrate & invert exam!

14th March last mock survey all good and we all passed out as official “eco divers” this followed by our first official survey on Tomak. On fish with Cathy!

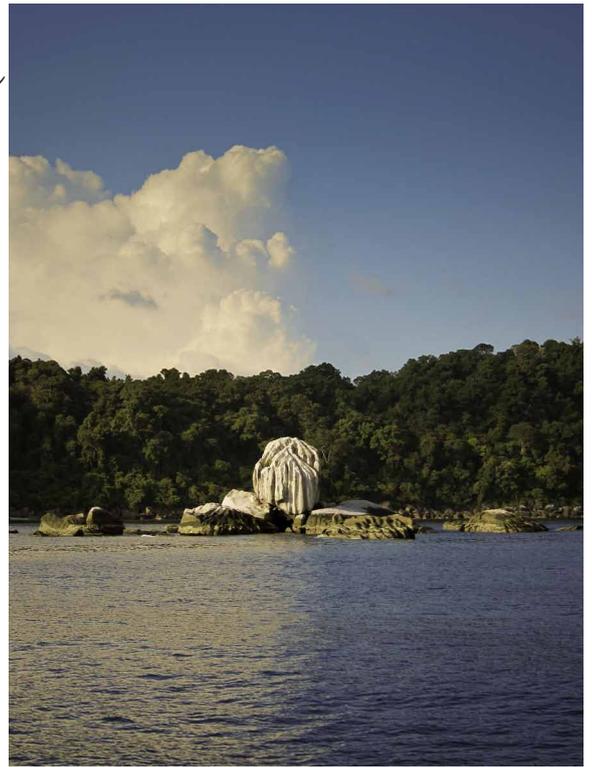


15th March

"The first team of the 2013 Malaysia expedition have all passed their Reef Check exams and are, as I write, under water conducting their second actual research survey. Yesterday, we surveyed a site called Tomok, where last year I found a beautiful but dangerous flower urchin. Alvin, our scientist, is happy with the progress of the expedition thus far and today after lunch we board the Araliya and head out to sea."

The survey was Renggis north, fewer, but still too many diadema's, ask me I counted them with Cathy. Having eaten a few of their gonads the week before in Bari, I still think Liz condoning dynamite fishing may be a reasonable solution. We also saw another shark, turtle, and barracuda!

After stowing our gear we headed out to sea with a fun dive off the Island of Tulai on some stunning rocks. First dive with a camera but... rule number one check your air! Only 22 mins bottom time for me because I was out of air. But enough to greet a turtle face to face and watch a bird wrasse eating a clam. Paul on dinner with veg burgers. Bit of a tricky sleep not properly rinsing the sea salt Cathy on the sea pills everything else good.



*Sailing,
Plain sailing!*





16th March: The sunrise was magic from our little cabin in the bow which has a deck hatch that opens onto the dive deck.

We dived Soyak, me on substrate, a bit boring but job done, then inverts with Hermine on Teluk Dalam. Spotted our first red banded coral shrimp. Cool site, bad storm damage but lots of new coral recruits growing on the storm rubble. Cathy got a bit of dehydration and spent the trip around to Juara Beach sick and flat on deck which was a bit of a worry but at least she saw the dolphins!

Dinner on land, Jara Beach.



17th March: A rest morning with a walk around Juara. Interesting up the river with mangrove, flying lizard, mangrove crabs, macaque monkeys. Cathy resting on board. The weather was a little rough for the afternoon dive. It was a magic site with the onshore winds obviously having an effect on the reef but it was in good condition and lots of nudis.

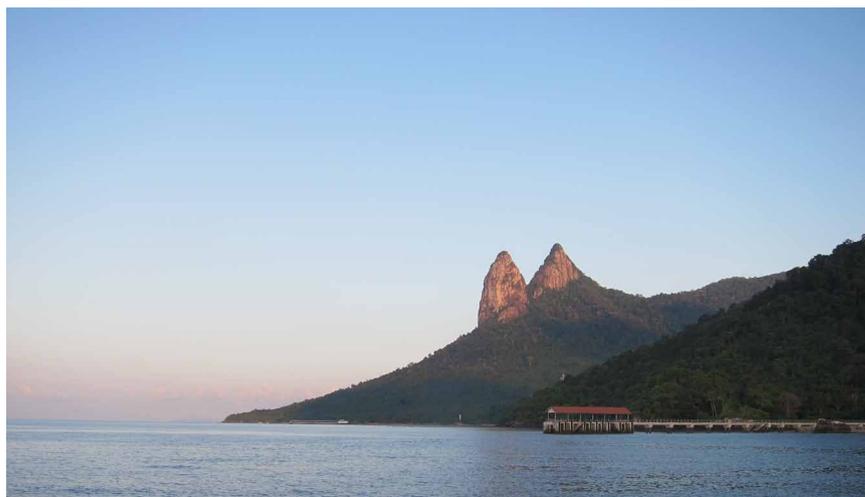
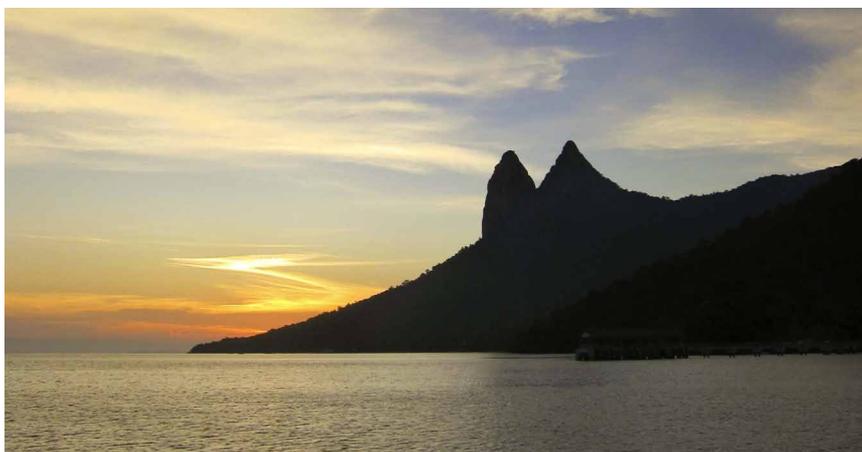
Evening we walked to the Juara turtle project to meet Charlie and the unfortunate blind turtle Jo.

18th March: After two evenings in the Juara bay we moved around the south of Tioman to Mukut village. Two dives along the way Teluk and Mukut. Fish and inverts for me. A rare huge Cowrie like we used to find with my sister Anne in Mozambique back in the '60's!! Also a baby scorpion fish at the end of the transect.



Juara Turtle Project: Hatchery Data 2012	
Kg Juara & Surrounding Nesting Beaches, Tioman	
Green Mothers	6
Hawksbill Mothers	2
Total Number of Nests	44
Total Number of Eggs	4,837
Total Number of Hatchlings	4,276
Hatching Success Rate	88.4%





Evening the 18th to morning of the 19th don't get much better than that...

A fresh water swim was a refreshing break and surprisingly cool. Alvin thought he might need an AC in his hut on the beach, I don't think so, the rainforest works just fine!





A new site for Reef Check which Cathy got to name after all the giant clams we found there, the Prof gave it the scientific equivalent though.. Tridacna. Its a magic site.

Later the same day we dived Lobster bay, not that exciting lots of stag horn, so when on fish its not that much fun

20th March:

Big bad diving machines now we dived Old Man, named after a turtle who frequents the bay. Might have been him, we saw one but also a Bumphead Parrot! What a treat!

The next dive was at Bumphead, but we had already seen those. But lots of Nudi's but Alvin's flying nudi was still to come?

That evening we headed out to Permanggil south east of Tioman and settled into the main harbour bay for the evening and dinner on shore. It was also an opportunity for Cathy to "replace" Alvin's bandanna which she had nearly lost a few times.

A fun dive in the eve was really surprising as you would not have expected to see so much in this busy place.. Including the sexy shrimp. And only my second opportunity to use the camera

The pic at left "upside down" is how we spent most of our time searching carefully for inverts



and fish.

21st March:

Sadly our last diving day on the expedition. First one was "north" but more west if you ask the "Skip" Just after we started the transect Alvin came back to call us to something obviously really exciting. A rapid swim to see what, but sadly we just missed a sea snake eating an eel but saw two huge groupers >0.6m . We hurried onto the next dive to give the early flyers their 24hrs..

Across the bay "South" or east. Alvin found and filmed a flying "nudi" actually a flat worm, we destroyed some old fish traps and got the data!

The long haul back would have been ideal for a sail and it promised to give us a bit of wind but no sooner than we got the sail up it died and we had to motor our way back to Ginting where we laid up for the short pitch back to Tekek.

22nd March: Not sure I will ever live this down but got Cathy and Richard up for our early" flight only to find out I'd got it mixed and we only had an evening flight!

A lie in after an exhilarating trip would have been ideal. But WOW a true sense of having done something useful but had a wonderful time doing it learning a lot about what you tend to take for granted.

I'd recommend it to anyone and would like to get our boys involved in a future one, and us maybe Namibia?

