



## EXPEDITION DIARY Honduras 2007

By Kathy Wilden

12 March

Hello everyone and welcome to the Honduras 2007 diary. I'm Kathy, your expedition leader, and you will be hearing from me regularly over the next few weeks. I'm all packed up and I will be boarding a flight to San Pedro tomorrow very early in the morning, so by the time you get this, I should be at the Banana Republic or on the island. 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 recently published report of the 2006 expedition available via [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/reports](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/reports).

So long

Kathy Wilden  
Expedition leader

16 March

I'm settled in here now on what is the epitome of a paradise island. Not only is the place stunningly beautiful, but it's also sparkingly clean courtesy of the President of Honduras who dropped in for a visit last week! Even just swimming off the beach here there are fish coming into the shallow waters and the visibility here, at least, is excellent. Arrangements are virtually finalised with the survey sites now agreed and our timetable organised. When people arrive on the Sunday we'll spend some time on briefings and orientation, and then the next two days will be training for the survey work. After that we will settle into a daily routine with one survey dive in the morning and one in the afternoon. That's the general plan anyway, but remember to stay flexible as nothing is as constant as the change on plan on expedition ;->

I'll be travelling back to La Ceiba on Saturday morning to do some shopping and last minute paperwork and I'll be around on Saturday evening if anyone from the first slot would like to meet up for supper. I'll come to the Banana Republic Guesthouse at around 7 pm and hang around for half an hour or so hoping for a date, so if you fancy joining me just turn up – I'll be somewhere around the reception. For our official meeting I'll be back at the Banana Republic Guesthouse at about 6.40 am on Sunday morning - our 7 am meeting time is the earliest start on the whole expedition, but it is essential that you are there on time as the boat has to leave early enough to beat the developing waves that cause a nasty choppy sea later in the morning. If anyone needs to contact me then please use my local mobile. Looking forward to meeting everyone.

18 March

The team set off on a dark and rainy morning from the main marina in La Ceiba. An expedition atmosphere had already kicked in as the promised breakfast didn't arrive (cook delayed by car trouble), it was pouring with rain, and people and gear were all wrapped in big black plastic bin-liners for the 40 min boat ride to our island base. We arrived on time at around 9 a.m. and were happily greeted with a toasted sandwich by way of brunch. The rest of the morning was then taken up with an introduction to the island and the area, and a run through of the risk assessment.

Following lunch the team sorted dive gear and paperwork and had their first taste of the water with a quick dive from the beach and a couple of buoyancy exercises. Two of us stayed on land and had great fun watching people appearing, going down, then reappearing, being loaded with more weight and finally going down never to be seen again. One of the exercises was a practice 'hover' in the water (this is where the diver has to hang/sit at the same depth for a period, effectively hovering in one spot). This would have been fine had the practice area been just a little bit deeper but as it was there were several body parts regularly coming into view above the water, depending on which way up the individuals were 'hovering'.

Once kit and people had been rinsed, the team showed great fortitude and opted to watch the Reef Check training video rather than collapse in their cabins. For those who have seen this video they will understand the invigorating effect of the main presenter, Craig. Team members from last year will be pleased to know that he is still 'outstanding' and that we are all using the Craig 'length check' procedure now (this is where you put your fins on and stretch one leg out to the side whilst extending the other arm upwards – this should give you a length of around 2.5 metres to use as a guide to distance underwater).

19 March

After breakfast, the day began with a walk-through of the survey method that we will be adopting underwater. A transect line (or tape measure, as the non-scientific community likes to call it) was laid out on the beach in front of our cabins and the team practiced carrying various pieces of equipment and slates as they walked down the line looking for fish (a few strangely shaped pieces of cardboard had to suffice) and sand ('yep, found some more') whilst avoiding the palm trees (ouch!). This may seem like a strange thing to do, but it gives a good idea of how slowly the team need to swim for the survey work, and how long the 100 m transect actually is, even though we're not necessarily seeing many of the indicator fish. The exercise did yield the first adaptation to come from this year's team. Last year the team came up with signs to use underwater to tell each other about the different types of substrate (things found on the bottom) that they came across. The 2007 team have adapted 'rock' from a simple 'fist' (which could have been confused with the sign for 'hard coral' which is a fist that moves up and down) to a much cooler and more L.A. version with the first and ring fingers being raised and the middle 2 fingers being held back by the thumb. I think you need to say 'yo' at the same time into your regulator.

The rest of the morning was taken up with identification (ID) work in the dry lab. The team went through presentations and discussions on all of the aspects of the work that they will be doing. There were a lot of questions particularly relating to the difference between coral bleaching and coral disease, and how to tell them apart. Luckily enough there just happened to be a PhD student, who specialized in this area, on the island and he was kindly giving a talk that evening, so it was agreed that we would clarify some of the more complex aspects that evening.....so, the next step was off to the water with our equipment. Italo, our dive leader and scientist, picked a relatively shallow area with a sandy bottom and a reef fringing the area. This proved to be an excellent training ground for practicing diving in a head down position holding various slates for writing on and for assisting with identification, plus some lucky people who were also carrying 2.5 m long PVC pipes as well. After a short swim-through everyone relaxed and managed to have a look at the reef as well before we headed home.

Our evening highlight was a talk from John, the coral reef scientist, who has been studying the reefs around Cayos Cochinos for the past 5 years. He was supported by a visiting scientist from Edinburgh University, Greg, with a large water probe that he was using to sample many aspects of the quality of the water around the reefs. John was also supported by the consumption of a small amount of rum and coke (by his audience as well as him), which helped us all to spot the fish in his presentation and cope with the long technical terms, such as 'isotope', 'quadrat' and 'coral'.

20 March

This was our final training day before the beginning of the work proper. We had a full dress rehearsal with everyone taking all their equipment and recording all the necessary data. Although there were some issues with speed (the fish team disappeared over the horizon, and the invert team held the substrate team up slightly too much so that we didn't quite finish the transect before we had to end the dive) but apart from this it all looked good. I think the team felt that it was a bit chaotic, but it definitely looked like controlled chaos and gave myself and Italo every faith that the team would be ready to do their first real survey the next morning.

The afternoon was spent with more ID work and some individual study. This included working in the dry lab, but one enterprising team decided that a little swim and a snorkel from the beach would also add to their study, so they managed to fit this into their intensive work programme.

21 March

The day began with much rejoicing as the God Neptune saw fit to deliver beer from the sea (plus chocolate and coke) - well, actually I think it came from La Ceiba, but the effect was the same. There was so much excitement that two people promptly fell ill and couldn't come diving. Actually, that's not quite true. Su had unfortunately suffered with a very painful ear the evening before and had been inspected by our resident ear specialist Doctore Juanito (or John, the coral reef scientist who also doubles as an ear consultant when necessary, no formal qualifications just a lot of experience). Su had been declared unfit for diving so had to sit the day out. That morning Doerthe had come down with a head cold and had also decided, very sensibly, to take the day off.

The reef check divers had two very good dives with excellent team work throughout and some good data collected. The non-diving pair also had an excellent day with some crucial sun-bathing in the morning followed by a visit to one of the communities on a local island and some economic redistribution of wealth in the form of buying cold beers.

22 March

Our second full Reef Check day and everyone is working really well as a team. The survey kicks off with Matt and Alex carrying their 2.5 metre long PVC pipes and swimming at a slow steady pace down the transect spotting all the indicator fish that swim into their 'box' (a 5 m wide by 5 m high tunnel that runs down the 100 m transect line). After them come Rachel, Rachael and Alf, working on spotting the 'little critters' that live on the bottom and counting a couple of specific soft corals from the Gorgonian family. The first part of the job is really quite fun - trying to look in all the crevices and holes for lobsters, banded shrimps and little molluscs. The second part of the job is more like hard graft, as counting the Gorgonians is surprisingly time consuming because there are so many of them. There are so many that we have had to use a different counting system from the usual 5 bar gate - for gorgonians we have followed the pattern set by last year's teams and adopted a circle for 10 with a cross over it for the next 10. Using this system there is just about enough room to put all 150 odd of them onto the slate! The final team is the substrate team. They have the job of recording what is on the sea bottom at half meter intervals all the way down the transect. This can be the most difficult job as the measurer spins round and round on their head trying to drop a plumb line onto the substrate to get an unbiased view on what's on the bottom. It can also be one of the most rewarding jobs as the sense of achievement at the end of a transect is immense. Through all these jobs the teams have really come together and look like true professionals.

You'll be pleased to know that Doerthe has now recovered and was able to dive today. Unfortunately Su has not, so we have made our first trip over to the small clinic that is run by a retired nurse on the neighbouring island. There was good news and bad news - no infection in the ear but no diving until Monday. Su, however, is really pleased with this because having kept out of the water for a day she is now being allowed to swim and snorkel - it really isn't fair being on an island like this, surrounded by inviting blue waters, and not being allowed to go in.

The weather here continues to be very strange (El Nino, the boatmen say). It has rained almost every day that we have been here at some point. There has been a series of tropical downpours, followed by strong sunshine, and all accompanied by fluctuating winds - shortly before the storm the wind drops to nothing and then blows up as the rain clouds come over. This doesn't really bother us as we get plenty of sunshine and as we're diving most of the time it isn't really an issue. However, there is an associated fluctuation in sand flies, which does have an impact on the team. The nasty little bitey flies seem to be everywhere, especially when the wind drops away, they come out in their thousands. My best recommendation to all those coming on the next slot is bring your waterproof jackets, and please don't forget your insect repellent or you're going to be 'uncomfortable'.

Back to our day. We rounded it off with two very interesting talks in the dry lab, this time accompanied by beer. The Chief Executive from the Honduran Coral Reef Foundation gave a formal welcome to the team and his Director of Conservation gave a talk about the work of the Foundation and the use that they put the data that Biosphere collects. One of the main findings from the work last year was that there was a major absence of predator fish and that this was most likely due to fishing. The Foundation is therefore beginning to extend the boundary of the no-fishing zone so that it reaches all the way to the mainland and should therefore make a major contribution to the sustainability of the reefs. Then Greg, the visiting senior lecturer from Edinburgh, gave us a fascinating talk about the work that he does looking at activity that goes on deep on the ocean floor and his upcoming work with a sub that will take him more than 1 km below the surface. The first question from the floor was one that we all wanted to ask 'how much space have you got in your sub and how do you select people?'. It seems that there is no available room...

23 March

Su has been 'signed off' diving until Monday by the clinic nurse and Doerthe still has a head cold, so didn't dive this morning. That, and the fact that Tony, our knowledgeable PADI journalist, left the island early in the morning, left us a few hands short for the morning dive today. The team, however, as usual, coped admirably without a hitch. 'M Dog' or Matt as he is otherwise known, has taken up the status as most likely to get sunburnt and therefore the status of 'most covered up man' on the island. He effectively utilizes two Buffs on his head and neck, gloves, wetsuit etc and is shortly to add socks to his look. Our L.A. team members have decided that it would be an interesting addition to our research work to send M Dog into the more colourful parts of L.A. and observe the consequences, but the rest of us are not sure that this conforms to the 'no touch' requirement of our research.

This afternoon's dive proved eventful. The team were a little tired after lunch, so I can only assume that our dive leader, Italo, instigated a number of happenings to wake them up and keep them on their toes. First there were a couple of leaking O rings as we were kitting up, but once we were out in the boat we thought that all problems were solved. Unfortunately, when we got to 'La Arena', our dive site, there was an obvious problem with a leaking tank valve, two slightly misleading gauges (two of the team were apparently fish and didn't use any air) and then Italo threw in an 'out of air emergency' himself and buddy breathed his way to the surface thanks to Alf. The rest of the team managed to complete the survey and bring in the transect line – quite an impressive team response to 'one of those dives'. The day was rounded up with some suitably intellectual conversation around world politics (Europe/USA debate), modern cultures (Alex, one of our 18 year old team members explaining 'stuff' to us oldies) and literature (the merits of 'Catch 22' and 'The Life of a Geisha' over Mr Darcy in 'Pride and Prejudice').

24 March

Pelican 2 was our destination today, and two masterfully completed survey dives. There were lots of sightings of barracuda, lobsters, triggerfish, surgeonfish and even a scrawled filefish and several cowfish. None of these, of course, are the ones that we need to count, but hey, it makes for a great dive. This was the last day for everyone to work in their current teams and everyone seemed to be showing off about how good they were after four days of survey work. Tomorrow is a rest day and then everyone will switch teams so that they can carry out a different part of the survey work.

Today is Italo's birthday, and with a day off work tomorrow we have decided to make tonight party night. In preparation for this almost all of us had a nice nap after lunch today, and some even 'napped' their way through the dive briefing and halfway through kit-up time. It's a good thing we're taking it easy tomorrow.

26 March

Party night was fun with the team staying up late into the night talking. The hard core stayed up until around 2 a.m. and had a wonderful of experience when they went out onto the jetty to see the stars and saw a host of rays hanging out under the jetty. A great end to a good night.

The next day was rest day. Most of the team opted to take the walk across the main ridge on the island and down to the north beach to help with beach cleaning in preparation for the turtles to nest there in June time. It is amazing the amount of litter that gets washed ashore here, most of it coming from the mainland. The team had a very productive, and hot, time and made a real impact on the rubbish that had accumulated on the beach. The north beach is a wonderful, unspoilt and deserted spot and it is very satisfying to bring it back to the pristine state that it should always remain in. After our cleaning efforts a boat came to pick us and the rubbish up and transport us back to the research station in time for lunch.

After lunch the team set off, some for a fun dive and some straight to the hotel over on the next island. The hotel team spent the afternoon sipping chilled white wine and talking the time away. The diving crew returned to the hotel after their dive and we all enjoyed a couple of drinks before we took the boat back to base as the sun was setting. An early night was had by all in preparation for more work the next day.

After up to 10 hours sleep for some of us, we bounded into Monday with renewed enthusiasm and a switch around of the work allocations. New teams had been agreed the day before and now each member needed to apply slightly different skills to their work. Su had tested her bad ear the day before on the fun dive and was pronounced fit to dive, so we were back up to full strength. Everyone performed with true professionalism and we had two great dives at Cayo Timon, with Italo even spotting a large nurse shark. When I went to pick up the end of the transect tape to reel it in I got a big surprise to find a large crab holding on to it with its claw – it turned out to be a dead one that had been placed there by our dive leader but it took me a few minutes of working out how to get it off before I realized (very funny Italo!!).

27 March

Tuesday dawned and El Avion beckoned. El Avion is the site of a sunken plane that lies in the sand just along the side of the reef. The wreck was going to be very close to our transect so all of the team were hoping for a glimpse, and some were looking for a full photo shoot. For the first dive of the day, Su decided to sit it out as her ear had been playing up again, this meant that we were one man down and had lost her excellent time keeping abilities (which involved very exaggerated watch tapping at tardy members of her invertebrate team to keep them in line).

As there was to be a bit of a swim from the boat to the start of the transect we were instructed by Italo to kit up and get into the water quickly – you'd be amazed at how quickly a group of amateur researchers can metamorphose into a U.S. navy seal team in a matter of seconds. You could almost hear the shouts of 'Go, Go, Go' as each diver in turn rolled backwards into the water and then headed off for the start of the transect. The dive itself was quite hard work as the visibility wasn't great but everyone got a good look at the plane and ended the dive happy. For this afternoon's dive the current had got up which made entering the water a bit trickier than normal and the visibility still wasn't great. The invert team had their time taken up with a massive sea urchin count but other than that there was very little to see today.

28 March

Our final work day and unfortunately now two people down. Matt fell ill to a slight stomach bug in the night and is therefore resting this morning, and Su is still out of action (although her tan is now looking really good). We saved the best deep dive until last – Pelican 3 – which is my favourite site, with big towers of coral that you can swim around. Unfortunately, this makes for a complicated transect line, weaving around the coral heads. It was great and we had high hope when we returned in the afternoon with Matt back up to speed. Unfortunately, the shallow reef at the same site was dreadful, like a moonscape, and very shallow (which allowed some of us to snorkel the whole transect).

There is a definite feeling of the end of the expedition this evening. Eric, our resident professional photographer, has just taken probably the best group picture in the entire history of Biosphere. He is also going to give us a slide show of his best pictures from the expedition, so we should have a good night ahead.

Tomorrow is a fun dive, followed by a short break at the hotel, and then cleaning up and packing, ready to leave the island early on Friday. We've had a great time (don't listen to the grumbles about the food and the sandflies, but if you're in the next slot please could you spare the expedition leader and not moan on about your need for oranges!) and gathered loads of good data. Thanks to all in slot one and I look forward to the next!

2 April

Just a quick interlude to say that the second team have now all arrived safely. Andreas was delayed by 24 hours (stuck in Houston and then detoured via the capital here) but arrived first thing today. We only have one missing bag now and I'll send a full diary entry when I get some time, hopefully tomorrow.

3 April

We're well underway with the second slot now and are nearing the end of the training. I was very sorry to say goodbye to the last of the people from the first slot on Sunday morning – thanks especially to Matt and Kate for not only being up to wave us off, but also for offering a European postal service (Matt) for me and a U.S. Dollar exchange service (Kate) for anyone who would take her rates!! (only kidding, they were very good rates really).

Unlike the first slot we set off on Sunday in hot sunshine, the only clouds in sight were the ones that permanently hover over the mountains along the coast. Our team was short of one person who was stuck in Houston, but our boat was 'snuggily' full with the rest of the team and some staff from WWF who were going out to one of the communities that live on the Cays near to the research base. After a bouncy but dry crossing we arrived at base in time for a light breakfast and a briefing about living on the island. The afternoon was spent with a brief dive from the beach to do weight checks and a couple of exercises.

The next day we were very pleased to greet our lost team member, in the form of Andreas, arriving by the morning boat from La Ceiba. It turned out that he had shared the boat of the President of the Honduran Coral Reef Foundation, so probably more style than the rest of us had travelled in! El Presidente is arriving here for his Easter holidays and we have been told to expect most of his family too, so we are looking forward to a Honduran (one team member, our dive leader and the rest of the country), Italian (the reality TV crew who are here building sets etc in preparation for their show which starts in a couple of weeks – a 'Survivor' type programme), German (four of our team) and UK (two of our team plus me) Easter celebration next weekend. The Germans want to hide eggs all over the island for everyone to look for, the UK want to eat chocolate, the Italians want to drink wine and the Hondurans don't care as long as there's dancing!!

Our Reef Check training was taken on with admirable concentration and seriousness by everyone in the team. We have one team member who has just started working for the Foundation and speaks little English, so we are having bi-lingual training sessions with this team – and I think my Spanish is improving a little at the same time. That morning was spent going through presentations with lots of questions and discussion on the various aspects of the survey work. In the afternoon we did an orientation dive where everyone took the Reef Check equipment with them and had a short practice over the transect and then a look at the reef and the fish. After the dive we met back in the dry lab for a debrief and some book work – I left them all still working at 6pm!! Very impressive.

Today we had our first 'dress rehearsal'. It went pretty well – the fish team were impressive and only slightly confused by the damselfish who liked to swim across the transect pretending to be butterflyfish; the invertebrate team did okay, but sped down the line ('we didn't see anything') and only stopped for the occasional tea-party and a good chat by writing on their slates; the substrate team looked great, with good buddy working and a conscientious approach, unfortunately they ran out of time half-way down the transect!! So all in all a good first attempt – we'll do another trial run tomorrow morning and hope to start the work for real in the afternoon. This afternoon has been spent with more book work and the team are planning to snorkel the small reef at the end of the beach, just to top up their ID work.

8 April

Happy Easter Sunday, and our day off. As we had already achieved the beach and underwater cleaning around the jetty we decided that we were due a proper day off so while Italo snoozed in his bed, the team set off for a walk across the island to see the north beach. As the previous team had done such a good job of cleaning only two weeks before, we prepared ourselves for a walk and some snorkelling over the other side.

We spent a very happy two hours strolling through the woodland on the high ridge that crosses it from south to north. Marcio led the team and talked us through the ecology of the island with help from two able interpreters, Andreas and Captain Jack (Daniel). The Captain was especially enraptured by the stories of buried pirate treasure on the island but swore blind that with all the rum that he had drunk over the years he couldn't remember anything about where it was (I should point out that Daniel doesn't drink so we're not sure we can believe this). Unfortunately the only items we found that had been discarded by humans was a very long cable going across the island and a whole load of rubbish at the summit of our journey (those damned Italians, I'm afraid). Also, when we got to the beach it had, once again, become litter-strewn and we were sorry not to have brought any bin bags with us. Having said that, the walk itself was great with lots of sightings of hermit crabs, why they drag themselves to the top of the island we were unable to find out, but there were a lot of them there. We also found a very strange looking tiny silvery snake which it was suspected was a new discovery, but we have yet to confirm or name our discovery. We failed to see any of the famous pink boas that live on the island but enjoyed the hunt.

On our return, very hot and, yet again, sweaty, we had a quick lunch and then (after recovering our dive leader who had got lost somehow on one of the local islands having some chicken and potato apparently ;) we set off on our 'fun' dive.

...next section of diary courtesy of expedition team member Neil...

You have to remember this IS NOT A HOLIDAY, so we aren't really allowed to have fun (but so far we've had lots!). We headed to Peli 3 for some cave diving and low and behold Kathy finally saw a hogfish (the fish our boat is named after) kindly pointed out to her by the ever alert Velly (Neil's German nickname). A few underwater team photos later and some rather strange sea horse swimming and we retired to the hotel on the neighbouring island to sink a few white wines as the sun set across the raging seas (these Honduran storms!)

The Anglo-German relations have been permanently intensified by the terrible German efficiency (complete lack thereof), however, following his earlier reprimand from Herr Kathy, Daniel is now much improved! The late night card games are doing little to enhance relations as the favourite German game of Skat is constantly rubbished by the ignorant Brits.

Due to the early start on the wine an early night was had by most, in fact some even skipped dinner altogether. With the new day looming, and new teams with new skills you may have expected some last minute revision of the new skills required, not this terrible loutish behaviour.

9 April

After a week of zero banded shrimp on the slates, Neil spotted three in his first day of searching, impressive work! Neil is a natural and a truly gifted diver, I don't know how the others dare to dive in the same water, he's so great!!

...thanks for your entry, Neil, I'm going to take over again!!!...

Our last three days of Reef Check work was marked by some interesting sites and a world championship in free diving that was soundly won by Ronnie, our Honduran 1st mate who has been a lobster fisherman all his life. He was able to swim down to around 15 m and then swim along the bottom a bit and slowly ascend. The combined European team probably managed to get down to around 6 m before they had to surface and gulp for air. There were several occasions when we were finishing our dive and Ronnie would nonchalantly swim past on a leisurely reccee.

Apart from the survey work, our last few days have been marked by evenings spent watching for rays from the end of the jetty (there are usually eight that swim around in circles under the lights), beer and card games, a lot of German jokes (some are pretty funny), lots of people being pushed in the water, and a lot of reminders that 'This is not a holiday'. We have also been learning how to say 'outstanding' in other languages - for the linguists amongst us, the German version is 'aussergewöhnlich' and the Spanish version is 'extraordinario'. I'm thinking of printing this on the backs of the T-shirts for next year.

12 April

We've finished all our survey work and had an excellent fun dive this morning. We actually left very early, at 8.30 am, but only after some stern words from our Captain the evening before - finally the Germans have proved their efficiency (and were not late because they were 'washing their socks' or some such other excuse)!! The dive was marked by a sighting of a turtle who surfaced to have a look at us and then disappeared again beneath the water. It was also marked by our early arrival ahead of some Italians (those damned Italians again) who wanted to take our mooring, but luckily we got there before them and they had to queue.

We are just tidying up equipment, swapping photos and completing log books before we head off to the hotel on the next door island for a relaxing afternoon.

17 April

Well, I'm back in the UK and have just finished doing the debrief with the office staff here. I'd just like to say a final thanks to everyone, for making the expedition not only productive, but lots of fun too.

There are some images that will stay with me for a long time (usually for a good reason) and many happy memories. You'll get an e-mail from the office about the picture sharing website that we've got, but I'll mention it too as it is really great to be able to get copies of other peoples' photos (and there don't seem to be any on there yet!!). [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureexchange](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureexchange) explains how it all works (scroll past the links to see the instructions), so please start sharing.

Take care - Kathy.