

OMANIS FOR OMANI REEFS

COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

ARTICLE BY SAM MITTMERHAM

Since 2009 award-winning international conservation organisation, Biosphere Expeditions, with the support of the Reef Check Foundation, the Marine Conservation Society and the Anglo-Omani Society, have been surveying Omani reefs and training Omanis in reef survey techniques.

This has resulted in the establishment of marine protected areas in Musandam and community-based surveys near Muscat. Now Omanis, spearheaded by Jenan Alasfoor, have taken the next step, setting up local endeavour Reef Check Oman and giving Omani reefs the science-based care they need.

I was six metres under the sea when Dr Matthias Hammer tucked me firmly under his arm. I wasn't about to argue – mainly because I couldn't speak – but also he was

bigger than me and a former special forces soldier. An Oxbridge-trained biologist, international rower, ski instructor, wilderness medical officer and survival expert, Matthias – luckily for the world – has decided to use his powers for the good and set up Biosphere Expeditions.

I had arrived four days earlier to join a diving trip run by the organisation. A not-for-profit organisation, it specialises in adventurous conservation holidays that give volunteers the chance to participate in

Our live-aboard diving dhow "MS Sindbad" and limestone cliffs of the Musandam peninsula.



Technicolour reef.

scientific surveys, whilst training locals in conservation techniques for free. My group would be assessing the state of the beautiful coral reefs that fringe the Musandam peninsula.

It wasn't easy. For the first three days we breakfasted at 06:30 and as our dhow sailed past the towering limestone mountains that plunge straight into the sea, creating the area's fjords, we had classes with the expedition's marine biologist who taught us to recognise the fish, invertebrates and sea-bed terrain, and later we took exams in these subjects. We needed to pass at least one test to qualify to start Reef Check, an international reef-monitoring scheme that allows scientists to compare the state of the eco-systems around the world. Yet the first time we sank below the sea's surface the hard work seemed worth it. The landscape above was endlessly arid and unrelieved by vegetation, but underwater everything was in glorious technicolour.

We spotted a combative lionfish displaying its stripes and psychedelic parrotfish grazing on coral. Floating past rocks studded with black, spiky urchins were Arabian angelfish, larger than dinner plates. And to my excitement, I was suddenly surrounded by a fast-moving stream of silver fusilier fish. The corals themselves were beautiful – intricate structures in primary colours.

Dr. Hammer explained that coral reefs provide a habitat for 33% of the world's fish, and generate income for 20m people – but they are vanishing at an alarming rate. Created by delicate living organisms called polyps, they are easily killed. On the tiny



Dr. Matthias Hammer giving a dive safety talk.

propeller plane that flies between the peninsula and Oman's capital, Muscat, two women told me lurid tales of snorkelling tourists walking all over the coral.

And this is just one threat to the reef. While Musandam has no heavy industry to pollute the water, and no huge fishing companies, spearfishing is a problem in the region, and a recent cyclone by the name of Gonu and algae bloom have affected the

reef. Climate change also damages the coral, and our job was to track the health of the Musandam reef.

It took hours of staring at pictures, but eventually I learned to spot the differences between grouper fish (grumpy looking) and sweetlips (they pout like Angelina Jolie); urchins and sponge; hard coral and soft coral. And before we knew it, we were diving along the reef, surveying, a 100 m



Surveying the reef along a 100m transect line.



Arabian angelfish.

tape our line of science along which we record fish, invertebrates and ground composition, each of us collecting one data point after another. Over the days of the expedition, the surveys each year, over multiple years, a picture of the reefs' health emerges, reports are written and handed over to government, consultants and other decision-makers in Oman.

And later, when the surveying is done, back in the water with Dr. Hammer holding onto me, my face was inches from waving sea anemones, and for the first time I saw

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the coral flicker as the tiny creatures that build it retracted at our presence. Before I knew it I was dangled upside down to peer under rock ledges, looking for coral-banded shrimp and lobsters, and I spotted the inquisitive face of a moray eel. With my flailing arms finally calmed, I could swim without terrifying the snub-nosed butterfly

Check Oman and giving Omani reefs the science-based care they need.

Jenan Alasfoor from Muscat told me on the phone from Oman, “I am an avid diver and I was trained by Biosphere Expeditions and thanks to the Anglo-Omani Society to Reef Check Trainer level. I also recently became the Reef Check co-ordinator for

Oman. The ocean is my passion and reefs are under threat from climate change, pollution, development and other impacts. Reefs are a beautiful asset of our country, but it often seems they have no voice. We need more Omanis speaking up for our reefs and protecting them, not just because they are beautiful, but also because they



Moray eel.

fish, bright snappers and sulking groupers.

My experience with Biosphere Expeditions was in 2009, the year Biosphere Expeditions started working on coral reefs in Oman. Since then the organisation, with the support of the Anglo-Omani Society, has been surveying Omani reefs and training Omanis in reef survey techniques. In 2011 this resulted in the establishment of marine protected areas in Musandam and the first community-based surveys near Muscat in early 2017. And as I write this, Omanis – spearheaded by Jenan Alasfoor, a graduate of the Biosphere Expeditions placement programme for locals, which is funded by the Anglo-Omani Society – have taken the next step, setting up local endeavour Reef

Some graduates of the Biosphere Expeditions placement and capacity-building programme, sponsored by the Anglo-Omani Society. Jenan Alasfoor is in the middle.



provide income through tourism, protection from storms and form the basis of fishermen livelihoods around the coast.”

Dr. Hammer adds: “This is exactly what we need: local people surveying their own reefs and supporting government efforts so that the natural beauty of Oman can be better protected and passed down to the next generation, as well as safeguard livelihoods and traditions, for example of fishermen or those depending on income through tourism.”

In another positive development, both the Grand Hyatt Muscat, as well as Euro Divers Oman, have agreed to provide corporate support for Reef Check Oman’s community-based survey efforts. Karin Straub, Managing

Director of Euro Divers says: “Healthy reefs are the basis of our business, so we are proud to be working with Reef Check Oman towards this.” Paul Murphy, Managing Director of the Grand Hyatt Muscat agrees: “I am happy to confirm Hyatt’s support for this important effort to preserve the beauty of Oman, something our business is based on too.”

“And that’s great”, says Alasfoor, “because the more support we receive for our efforts, the better, and we are grateful to Hyatt and Euro Divers for their assistance, and of course to the Biosphere Expeditions and the Anglo-Omani Society for getting it all off the ground. I know the economic climate in Oman is tough at the moment, but if there are any more companies out there, who would like to become involved in community-based environmental protection schemes, they should contact me so that we can work with their CSR departments and staff.”

Beyond garnering support, the plan of

Reef Check Oman is now to co-ordinate concerted, community-based survey efforts around the country and to work with the government and Biosphere Expeditions to provide science-based information and solutions for reef protection.

Jenan Alasfoor concludes “the more Omanis we can train and the more capacity we can build, the better. So we invite divers and businesses all across Oman to join us in our efforts. With their help we can create something big and positive for our country. Reefs in Oman are threatened, and with them the country’s economy and well-being. Problems are overfishing, pollution and development without concern for the environment. The time to be aware of this and act accordingly is now, and if community-based surveys and the scientific data they will provide can help government to make the right decisions based on scientific facts, then everyone wins in the end.” ■

MORE INFORMATION:

Biosphere Expeditions
www.biosphere-expeditions.org
 Annual Musandam reef survey, open to all qualified divers on www.biosphere-expeditions.org/musandam.
 Placement programme for local people www.biosphere-expeditions.org/placements.
 Annual reef health reports www.biosphere-expeditions.org/reports.

Reef Check Oman
www.reefcheckoman.org.
 Businesses, other groups and individuals interested in supporting the community-based surveys can contact Jenan Alasfoor (GSM +968 99822116).

More information about placements for Omanis to be trained in reef survey techniques and to participate in other ways is on www.reefcheckoman.org/participate.html



Volunteer divers surround Karin Straub (second left) of Euro Divers Oman and Jenan Alasfoor (third left) of Reef Check Oman to celebrate the launch of Reef Check Oman and corporate support for its efforts. The Anglo-Omani Society logo is displayed in recognition of the Society’s support for the placement and capacity-building programme.