
Montserrat Ridge to Reef Conservation Project (MRRCP)

Monthly Project Update

June 2015

Location:

The Taj, Old Towne, Montserrat

Project Scientist: Susan Robertson



MRRCP Project Aim

The Montserrat Ridge to Reef Conservation Project (MRRCP) is a collaborative project to support the sustainable use of Montserrat's natural resources. The programme encompasses scientific surveys of coral reefs and other marine resources, as well as terrestrial species and habitats focussed primarily in the Centre Hills. The MRRCP provides training and conservation education opportunities for local Montserratians, as part of an integrated programme to develop local capacity and ensure the long-term protection and sustainable use of natural resources throughout the country. Coral Cay Conservation (CCC) is working at the invitation of and in partnership with the Government of Montserrat and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Coral Cay Conservation provides the resources to help sustain livelihoods and alleviate poverty through the protection, restoration and management of coral reefs and tropical forests.

Contents

- Latest news
- Story of the Month
- Survey Update
- Education & Community Projects
- Scholarship News
- Creature of the Month

Latest News

The staff and volunteers at CCC were invited to perform a puppet show at the Brades Nursery Schools Agriculture Day. Although the event was based at Brades all the nursery schools from around the island were invited to learn a variety of different aspects around agriculture on Montserrat. Due to the young age of the children the staff at CCC wrote a new puppet show especially for the event. The new puppet show focuses on the rubbish that is found in the ocean and the problems this creates for the creatures that live there. There are a few new characters in the show and the best reaction from the children was for Rachel the Ray played by her creator Heidi the new Scuba Instructor at CCC.



Story of the Month

Some of the staff and volunteers at CCC Montserrat got down and dirty for World Oceans Day on 8th June with a beach and ocean clean at Carrs Bay. With a total of only 5 people we were still able to make a big impact on the area in a single morning. With two divers and two beach cleaners at any one time we collected a total of 14 bags of rubbish both from the beach and the reef just in front of the beach. The rubbish as we expected was mainly tin cans but we were surprised to also remove several items of clothing which were wrapped around some of the gorgonians.

We did not manage to remove all the rubbish due to a limited number of divers but we will continue to remove any rubbish we see when we are diving on the site. Everyone had a satisfying if hot morning and our efforts were appreciated by a couple of local snorkelers who were just going in for a snorkel as we finished.



Some of the CCC team pose with their haul of rubbish, collected on a scuba dive along Carrs Bay

Montserrat Ridge to Reef Conservation Project Montserrat, June 2015



Survey Update

Survey background: The only comprehensive survey of Montserrat's coral reefs and other marine resources to date was carried out prior to the eruption of the Soufrière Hills volcano. CCC will be conducting enhanced Reef Check surveys around the island to provide an overview of the current status of the coral reefs of Montserrat and map marine habitats. Terrestrial survey work will build on research carried out during the Centre Hills Project (2005-2008) and focus on three main areas: 1) mapping invasive plant species; 2) surveys of resident and migrant birds; 3) reptile and amphibian surveys. If you would like more information on our surveying please contact our Project Scientist.

Marine Surveys



The marine surveys have continued apace this month with yet another cohort of volunteers completing the skills development program and undertaking some marine surveys around the coast of Montserrat. The new team were luckily enough on their first survey to see an Eagle Ray at Lime Kiln Bay and on their second survey they saw a turtle. Many of our volunteers never get to record any rare and exciting creatures on surveys so two in two surveys makes the June marine volunteers especially privileged.

Terrestrial Surveys

Our last terrestrial volunteer for a couple of months, Gill, finished in June after a busy three weeks. She completed many bird surveys alongside our science team and an invasive plant survey. Even without any terrestrial volunteers on site CCC will continue to collect data over the summer months.

Education and Community Projects

With World Ocean Day falling on the 8th June and the Atlantic Ocean right on our doorstep we decided to inform the children of Montserrat about the importance of oceans in this week's library session.

Science Officer Mike Soltysiak led the presentation, beginning at the beginning! The children were amazed to learn about the ancient animals that used to inhabit the oceans, and that some of those ancient and weird looking creatures were still alive today, having survived through the ages. Mike then debunked some of the myths about the oceans, although some of the children were adamant that mermaids were real! The children already knew a lot about ocean explorers, since Mr.

Montserrat Ridge to Reef Conservation Project Montserrat, June 2015



Christopher Columbus himself discovered the island of Montserrat – although he preferred the name of the Emerald Isle. The importance and the value of the oceans were then outlined, the children being amazed to discover that 70% of the oxygen we breathe is produced by the marine environment – how can water possibly produce air? The presentation finished off with outlining to the kids the threats that oceans currently face on both a global and a local scale, and how they can help to reduce those threats.

In the craft session that followed the children made their own boats and the Captain's hats to go with them, and credit has to go to Coral Cay volunteers Jenny Lantair, Gillian Leeder and Harry Woodger for their origami skills! Science Officer Sean Smith helped the children to decorate their boats and managed to avoid getting covered in glitter, although the odd sequin is to be expected!



*Jaina taking home the message of one of the ways to protect our Oceans!
Courtesy of Sean Smith*

The second library session this month was on Migrations. The lecture wasn't confined to marine animals only and had a host of interesting migratory species. Science Officer Sean Smith presented the lecture and started by outlining what migrations are and why some species migrate. The children were shown a series of animals and asked why they think they would be migrating. The responses were great and the kids got a real kick out of the pictures and the opportunity to contribute.

The lecture worked through all the different types of migratory animals, birds, mammals, insects etc. Whilst the birds went a little slowly at first the kids were flabbergasted when they were shown pictures of the arctic tern and were told that it flies the equivalent distance of three times to the moon and back over its lifetime! The other attention grabber was the Christmas island red crab which migrates in numbers of up to 100 million. It took some serious convincing for a group of kids who are quite happy to call you out if they don't believe you.

The lecture closed with a section on human migration and a take home message about the importance of protecting migratory habitat. The kids were amazed at all the novel methods of assisting migrations in particular the fish ladders and habitat corridors.

As usual the kids were hopping to get onto the craft. We decided to do something a bit more collaborative and contribute something to the library space. Using the projector the science staff traced a giant world map onto 16 A4 sheets. Outlines of 6 migratory animals were traced over a coloured in by the kids. The best animals made it onto the poster which was put together after it was coloured. The library was more than happy to have it up although it may find a final home in the Taj.

Montserrat Ridge to Reef Conservation Project Montserrat, June 2015



Scholarship News

Each month CCC offers Montserratian nationals who display an ambition to study and protect the vital natural ecosystems of Montserrat an opportunity to take part in one of our Conservation Scholarships. The programmes last for one month and involve training the student in SCUBA diving or jungle skills. They then take part in an intensive Skills Development Programme giving them the knowledge and expertise to conduct ecological surveys.

Creature of the Month!

A lucky team of volunteers on the swim back from their first survey spotted what will be the CCC Creature of the month for June. Appearing off to one side and turning back for a closer look was a Spotted Eagle Ray (*Aetobatus narinari*) an animal not usually seen in the shallow sea grass beds that fringe the Lime Kiln reef. We were all too happy to share some time underwater with the curious creature who is a must see on any diver's bucket list.

Spotted Eagle Ray's are found in tropical regions worldwide in depths up to 80 meters. They are mostly solitary creatures but will occasionally aggregate into small groups. The rays are easily identified by the distinct spotted pattern which covers wings of up to three meters. Eagle Rays are bottom feeders that use their flat snout to scout the benthos for bivalves and molluscs. They stir up large clouds of sediment that spew from their gills and then use specialized teeth to crush the shell of any unlucky prey.

Eagle rays are famous for their jumping and diving ability. Whilst our ray was happy to cruise along next to us just watching, other rays have been known to jump up to 4m vertically out of the water. As the animals are not selectively targeted by fishing activities Eagle Rays are only listed as 'Near threatened' on the IUCN Red List. However they are a common component of bycatch and are regularly entangled in shark nets.



Learn More!

To learn more about the MRRCP, to join the expedition, or to find out about local Scholarships, visit www.coralcay.org.

For news and updates from our projects around the world visit us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/pages/Coral-Cay-Conservation-The-Official-Site/274436156676