



## CAN-023-Coral Reefs-Maldives

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The World Federation for Coral Reef Conservation  
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Vic Ferguson



## Protecting the Maldives' coral reefs

Global warming threatens coral reefs around the world. Matthias Hammer, director of Biosphere Expeditions, talks to DW about involving local communities in reef conservation in the Maldives.

Coral reefs are increasingly at risk from rising temperatures and acidity.

*Deutsche Welle: Why are Reef Checks necessary?*

Reefs are in crisis really, all over the world, and until Reef Check was introduced in the 1980s, there was really no consensus on whether reefs were doing well or not amongst scientists. Now we have a methodology applied all over the world and you can compare reefs.

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*What are the major threats to reef ecosystems?*



The two biggest threats to reefs are acidification – with global warming the acid content in the water is likely to rise and the reefs can only tolerate certain acidity – so and the other big problem is just the water getting too warm.

*Biosphere Expeditions has just handed over the responsibility of doing Reef Checks on the Maldives' Velassaru reef to local divers. What's the significance of this approach?*

Biosphere Expeditions' director Matthias Hammer says working with local communities is key to protecting Maldivian coral reefs.

We run an annual reef survey in the Maldives and on each of those surveys we have a placement program with locals, training them to do their own surveys. This Reef Check that's just been out is the first time the local people have done it themselves.

*So what's the advantage of having locals carry out the work as opposed to experts from overseas?*

We want locals taking care of the local reef rather than experts coming in from the outside telling locals what to do. There's an absence of interest and from the government, so civil society will have to do it. And that's just what's happening. So we're building capacity and we're letting local people get on with protecting their local reef.

*Can you describe what's involved in a Reef Check?*

It's a methodology based on lay people-involvement so all you need to be able to do is dive, and then you're trained for two days to recognize indicator species – so these are species that are relatively easy to recognize – a lobster for example. An absence of lobsters indicates overfishing. Then you put a team together and you lay a line under water, for hundreds meters, and you dive along that line and then in pairs you record fish, invertebrates, substrate, and that gives you a snapshot of the health of the reef.

*So what state are the reefs of the Maldives in at the moment?*

It depends on where you are. The closer you are to humans the worse they come off. The Maldives are I think 1,200 islands, and only 200 of them have humans on, so the further away you get from the human centers the better the reefs are. But even if they are away from humans, they are still suffering from human-induced impacts such as higher water temperature, high salinity and acidification.

Over-fishing is another threat, especially close to human habitation. There's too much fishing going on of the food fish. And it's all connected, so if you fish out the food fish that keep the algae down then the algae will overwhelm the corals so the coral reef dies and you get a face-change from a coral reef to an algal reef.

*How has the situation changed over the last few decades?*

We are not doing very well at protecting our reefs. I have talked about higher temperatures, acidification and then there's also of course the corporatization of the world, so the Barrier Reef is a big topic at the moment – you have

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this world heritage site but you're building massive ports on it in order to export coal, for example, and dumping goes on over the reef. We have a pathological corporate society which is obsessed by profit – and the environment suffers.

*And what is at stake?*

There's a lot at stake – what kind of reef do we want to pass on to our children, what kind of natural world? There are also arguments that there's this wealth, there are ecosystem services, so for example there might be new compounds in medical research that are yet to be discovered that might make a big difference and they come from the reef. They're also acting as breakwater protecting us from wave currents and so on. So, all these things are important – especially in the Maldives – as a basis for the livelihoods of people.

*What sort of action is being taken to maintain the health of the Maldivian reefs at the moment and what else needs to happen?*

The Maldives are in a sense quite good, because they are declaring marine protected areas and the president has announced that he wants to make the entire Maldives a marine protected area. That's good, but it's no good if there's no enforcement of it or no buy-in from the local people. We conservationists say "what pays stays." Many fishermen – because they lack the education or they can't dive – don't understand the connection that if you overfish then there won't be any fish left. So these kind of locally based initiatives are really, really important because if you don't have local buy-in, then nothing happens.

*The interview was conducted by Charlotta Lomas. It has been condensed and edited for clarity.*

## DW RECOMMENDS

The marine riches of the Maldives

The spectacular coral reefs of the Maldives are in danger of dying out in some places. One project is trying to halt the destruction by roping in tourist resorts, local residents and marine biologists. (08.04.2014)

My favorite - the black-blotched stingray

For marine biologist Barbara Gratzner, the black-blotched stingray is one of the most graceful creatures of the Maldives. (29.07.2014)

Maldives - preserving coral reefs

(01.04.2014)

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*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing"....Edmund Burke*

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