

Diving with an Environmental Purpose - OceansWatch Team gets Reef Check Accredited



Sailors have long dreamt of a romantic paradise - dazzling white sand beaches caressed by waving palm trees and embraced by gently lapping waters all shades of blue and green; their boat anchored in a shimmering turquoise lagoon, the perfect platform from which to explore the enchanting world of the coral reef below - an underwater world alive with vibrant colour and activity.



Perfect as the picture sounds, all is not well in this captivating world and coral reefs need our help. Over 15% have been lost in the past decade and a further 30% are under severe threat. Anyone who has snorkelled or dived on a healthy coral reef will know how incredibly beautiful they are and what a fantastic variety of spectacularly colourful fish and other creatures inhabit their coral corners. They are the world's most biologically diverse marine systems and home to ¼ of all ocean fish; they provide livelihoods for their local human communities; act as a sensitive barometer for the health of our planet – in fact they play an important part in all of our lives.

This is why the 1st OceansWatch team has just returned from a training session in the Kingdom of Tonga for Reef Check accreditation. The stunningly beautiful island of Foa in the Ha'apai Group was the setting for an intensive, but really fun week of learning to identify coral reef flora and fauna. Reef Check was established in 1997 and their survey techniques have been chosen by OceansWatch as part of their marine conservation programme.



Studying in paradise has its advantages and after several hours pouring over pictures of fish we were able to slip into the warm blue water and go looking for the real thing. Tropical fish must be the most colourful creatures in the world – the attention to detail is unparalleled – with many juvenile fish having completely different colours and markings to the adults. With such intensive study in the 'classroom' we quickly started differentiating between hard and soft corals, butterfly fish and angel fish, coral bleaching and damage by the Crown of Thorns starfish, sponges and ascidians.



The actual Reef Check programme covered 4¼ days and our last dive consisted of surveying a 50m transect in about 6m of water. It was absolutely fascinating examining the reef life at close quarters with our new-found understanding of its biodiversity.

The Ha'apai Islands are a particularly unspoilt patch of paradise, but even so we discovered signs of the negative impact human activities, such as intensive fishing, reef walking, pollution and even careless divers and snorkelers, can have on a healthy reef system. The data collection is fun to do and offers sailors and divers a wonderful opportunity to dive with a purpose – to help preserve our coral reefs. Their health is assessed in a broad brush survey involving the collection of data on certain indicator species of fish, invertebrates and other organisms, together with information on coral types, damage and disease. This is fed back to Reef Check headquarters and goes towards the search for solutions to the crisis threatening them.

As a Reef Check accredited member of OceansWatch you have the enviable opportunity to assist in data collection, either by joining an established Reef Check team, or by working with us to put a team together from your own boat.



Exclusive to OceansWatch members, is the chance to get Reef Check trained in the Pacific in the absolutely awesome setting of the Ha'apai Islands, Tonga. Let us know if you're interested as we plan to organise a couple of training sessions this coming season.



Don't worry if you can't dive, because without any training at all you can still do something helpful. We can provide you with an underwater reef guide that will enable you to identify 52 different underwater creatures and just by snorkelling over the reef and duck diving down you can collect useful data. Another way to help is by using the simple coral health chart from CoralWatch, which you can take snorkelling or diving with you. Just by matching colour codes on the chart with coral colour and type and recording the results, you can contribute to a global database on coral health.

OceansWatch links sailors and divers together with marine conservation projects, as well as forming partnerships with local island communities to work with them to find practical solutions to some of their most basic of problems.

The OceansWatch team stayed at Matafonua Lodge www.matafonua.com and used their lovely veranda-café as the perfect classroom.

The Reef Check programme www.reefcheck.org was professionally delivered by trainer and OceansWatch member, Jos Hill from Reef Check Australia, who worked long hours to get us up to speed on our identification.

Expert diving support and equipment was very kindly and efficiently given by Glen Edney of Happy Ha'apai Divers www.tonga-dive.com, also an OceansWatch member and now certified as an OceansWatch Reef Check trainer. All OceansWatch participants were self-financed.

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