



A Man On A Mission

Saving Aqaba's coral reefs

By Anne Cakan



Park rangers, Dive Aqaba Course Director Rod Abootson (far right) and Craig Bohm (second from left) pose after an intense dive clean up at Ras Al Yamina



Craig Bohm is a man on a mission. A native of Australia, he has taken on the formidable task of repairing the wanton damage done to Aqaba's most precious jewel: its coral reefs.

Back home in Australia, Bohm witnessed for himself how greedy overfishing can push a species to near-extinction. Determined to use his experience and training in marine biology, ecology and management to make a difference, he recently accepted the post of Marine Environment Adviser with the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA).

In one of his many roles, Bohm has accepted the huge challenge of restoring Aqaba's six most important diving reefs to their former pristine glory. The Reef Restoration Project, which he developed, receives assistance from USAID's Aqaba Community and Economic Development (ACED) Programme and is a partnership between the Aqaba Marine Park and Aqaba Dive Association.

Aqaba's jewel

Aqaba's tropical coral reefs are world-renowned. Known as "fringing coral," the reefs sit right against the shore, where they are conveniently accessible to all. In addition, the Red Sea waters are clear, providing excellent visibility

for divers who explore this unique marine environment from the 15 diving centres that operate in Aqaba. Aqaba's location at the end of the Gulf also offers protection from harsh winds, permitting diving 365 days of the year – a dream scenario for the tourist industry. Apart from the well-documented environmental reasons, reefs burgeoning with wildlife also translate into burgeoning tourism, a vital contribution to the Jordanian economy.

Nature's miracle

A coral reef, itself a living thing, depends on all the little fish that feed on it. For the fish, the reef is their nursery – a safe haven that provides a healthy start to life. Then there are slightly bigger fish that feed on the

smaller fish; in the correct number, these bigger fish maintain the equilibrium and make sure too much coral doesn't get consumed. A few even bigger fish drop in from time to time, but their occasional meals do little harm. Even sharks have their place in the scheme of things.

At the mention of shark, Bohm's eyes light up. "Sadly, we don't get many sharks," he says, explaining that sharks are his favourite marine animals: they are the doctors of the reef who keep the system healthy. Just mention sharks to most people and they'll think Jaws and start to scream! But sharks come in right at the top of the check and balance list. In Bohm's opinion, "it is we humans who pose by far the greatest threat to our marine ecosystem."



Craig debriefs with marine park rangers after clean up dive 27

The threat

"People trample all over a reef in their flip-flops, not realising that standing on coral crushes and kills the polyps or coral animals with every footstep," Bohm explains before plunging back into the water in his wetsuit. Any walking around on the coral is therefore banned and rigorously enforced. Immense damage has also been caused by rubbish and fishing. Fishing in the Aqaba Marine Park is now illegal with the exception of commercial operations harvesting small fish for use as bait out in the open waters. In the past, fishermen went to great lengths, even using cyanide, to catch very few fish. The results were catastrophic. Thankfully, the use of cyanide is mostly history, but fishing line and nets still drift about and tangle around the coral, garrotting it. Pieces of coral break off, encouraging the growth of unwelcome algae and pollution of the reef. The untangling and retrieval of fishing lines and nets continues to be a major task for Bohm and the divers and rangers of Aqaba

Marine Park. The proliferation of litter generated by our consumer society now poses an equally serious threat: our plastic debris ends up in the sea and gets trapped on the reef, where it suffocates and buries the coral.

Saving the coral reefs

So just how does one set about the task of saving the coral reefs? Education is a major part of the Aqaba Marine Park Eco School's programme, which sponsors schools to come for educational visits to the Marine Park and also sends staff to visit schools throughout the country. The message Bohm puts forward is that everyone must take personal responsibility for their rubbish and not expect someone else to come along and clean up after them. "That's how we all do our part for the reef," he says. Bohm's aquatic mission will take time and demand great effort and continuous dedication. Nature regenerates slowly. With a growing public awareness of environmental issues on their side, however, the task of restoring Aqaba's coral reefs to their former glory will not be a mission impossible.



Craig and Rod inspect new park boundary markers designed by marine park staff