

Dive Staff Training Program

2008 is the International Year of the Reef. This provides an excellent opportunity to raise awareness and support for coral reef conservation initiatives in the Dutch Caribbean.

The Dutch Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten are a significant marine biodiversity hotspot. These islands are home to virtually every species of hard and soft coral found in the Caribbean along with an impressive list of invertebrates and reef fish. Recent studies by NOAA et al have shown that Bonaire's reefs are not only amongst the region's most biologically diverse but also the healthiest reefs in the Caribbean, closely followed by Saba and Statia.

The region attracts a huge number of visiting water sports enthusiasts, particularly divers. As coral reefs are coming under increasing pressure from human impacts such as sedimentation and nutrient enrichment as well as global effects such as climate change it is imperative that the effect that divers and other watersports enthusiasts have on the region's fragile coral reefs are kept to a minimum.

Divers cause both direct and indirect damage to reefs and are often unaware of the impact they have. However, dive operators and divers are natural ambassadors for coral reef conservation. They have a vested interest in a healthy, diverse marine ecosystems in which to dive and so can become strong advocates of marine conservation initiatives and practices.

Dive tourism is an essential component of the economies of each island of the Dutch Caribbean, generating significant income and creating employment. If diving is to be a sustainable industry it is vital that dive operators and their clients are well educated about the impacts they can have and the ways in which they can reduce them.

In the Dutch Caribbean most dive instructors and guides have had no formal training in coral reef conservation or how they should behave in coral reef environments. As the primary contact with thousands of visiting divers they are the key medium through which the parks can deliver clear conservation messages and promote sustainable diving practices. The dive professionals need additional training and accurate information if they are to be effective stewards of the reef. Therefore, using the platform of International Year of the Reef we will launch the project named "Dutch Caribbean Dive Staff Training".

1. Project Goal

To maximize active support for coral reef conservation from the dive sector by providing standardized training for dive staff tailored to the local circumstances.

2. Project Objectives

1. To develop Dutch Caribbean Dive Staff training to raise awareness and support for sustainable dive practices that will:
 - a. Provide a standardised training for dive staff throughout the Dutch Caribbean in conservation and sustainable dive practices.

- b. Deliver standardised messages to tourists visiting the Dutch Caribbean and provide optional certification for dive staff
 - c. Have a flexible component to enable training on each island to address specific local rules, regulations and circumstances
- 2. To select dive staff who are committed to reef conservation and are prepared to support and teach the course to other staff members (trainers)
- 3. To run dive staff training for at least 80% of dive staff on each of the six Dutch Caribbean Islands
- 4. To empower dive staff, making them champions of coral reef conservation able to build support for coral reef conservation practices and initiatives in the Dutch Caribbean.
- 5. To increase the awareness amongst the dive industry regarding the threats to coral reefs and the means of changing their practices to minimise the impacts of their dive operations and clients
- 6. To develop a certification programme for dive staff (Reef Rangers), which will acknowledge their ability to represent coral reef conservation interests on their island.

3. Project Scope

- 1. The dive staff course will be developed and piloted on Bonaire
- 2. Adapted courses will be run on Aruba, Curaçao, Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten.
- 3. Dive staff on participating islands will be certified as Reef Rangers

4. Project Results

Outputs:

- 1. A Dutch Caribbean Dive Staff Training course complete administrative elements (database, outreach) self study materials, workshop support materials, certification materials, tests and exams
- 2. Over 80% of dive staff on participating islands attend Dive Staff Training course

Outcomes:

- 1. Decrease in direct damage to corals by divers under trained instructors / guides supervision
- 2. Improved conservation ethic amongst dive operators and recreational divers
- 3. Improved reporting of infractions of conservation legislation by dive operator staff
- 4. Improved outreach and services to visiting divers
- 5. Improved compliance with rules and regulations by dive operators and their clients
- 6. Standardisation of diver education across Dutch Caribbean