

Conservation news

Community-led management lays the foundation for coral reef recovery in Cambodian marine protected areas

The proclamation of the Koh Rong marine protected area in 2016 signified Cambodia's first foray into large-scale protection of seascapes. This achievement was built on over 7 years of collaborative effort between government ministries and non-governmental organizations, including Fauna & Flora International (FFI). This marine protected area adopts Cambodia's Community Fishery approach to resource management, whereby communities are empowered to develop and manage their own fisheries resources through the creation of voluntary management committees and patrol teams. This collaborative approach has been successfully employed throughout the extensive freshwater fisheries of Cambodia, and is now gaining momentum in the marine space.

In April 2019 FFI, in partnership with the Song Saa Foundation and Kuda Divers, and with support from the Dive Shop Cambodia, conducted a research expedition in the Koh Rong marine protected area on behalf of the Royal Government of Cambodia. This expedition was the first since formal proclamation of marine protection, and the resulting data are essential as a litmus test to investigate how conservation and management efforts have affected coral reef ecosystem condition. Surveys were conducted at long-term monitoring sites, and at new locations that reflect the expansion of the protected area in 2018.

Overall, results from the expedition indicated that current management strategies are having a positive, stabilizing influence. Hard corals, the building blocks of tropical reefs, continue to increase in coverage, with no observable impact of the 2015–2016 global bleaching event (Hughes et al., 2017, *Nature*, 543, 373–377). Abundance of fish classified as commercially and economically valuable to local small-scale fisheries also exhibited stability, a promising sign that current levels of fishing pressure are not further diminishing fish stocks within the archipelago. In Koh Rong the fish biomass, a key metric used by protected area managers to assess anthropogenic influence on marine habitats, was assessed for fish species of the grouper (Serranidae) and parrotfish (Scaridae) families. Both target families showed an increase in biomass, a promising sign of management success. However, total biomass of both families remains low, indicative of a reef system that has been previously overexploited (Roff & Mumby, 2012, *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 27, 404–413). This must be improved to increase ecosystem functionality and fisheries status. Overall, although no dramatic recoveries were observed, almost all reef health

indicators in Koh Rong either exhibited stability or slight recovery.

If acting alone, community-led approaches cannot be seen as a silver bullet for effective management of marine protected areas. Evidence suggests that illegal fishing has not ceased at the site and incursions by large fishing vessels from outside Koh Rong remain a threat that community patrols in small boats are unable to prevent. However, utilization of volunteer community enforcement teams, as shown here in Koh Rong, can be an effective tool in engaging local resource users and mitigating further degradation of marine habitats when complemented by wider management measures and government support. This establishes a foundation for management through community engagement, empowerment and environmental stewardship.

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Conservation Leadership Programme 2020 Team Awards announced

In early June, the Conservation Leadership Programme (CLP) announced the winners of its 2020 Team Awards, which will provide support for 19 teams of early-career conservationists leading critical projects on globally threatened species. The awardees will benefit from project funding worth a combined total of USD 342,830, thanks to support from Arcadia—a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin. As part of the award, one member from each winning team will be invited to participate in CLP's international Conservation Management and Leadership course, which provides trainees with essential skills and networking opportunities to help advance their career in conservation. As a result of restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, this year the course will be held online, followed by an in-person reunion when it is deemed safe to do so. The awardees will also benefit from long-term mentoring from experts working within the conservation sector and will join CLP's global Alumni Network to gain peer-to-peer support, access to learning resources and grants, and other key information to help secure their future as conservation leaders.

This year's 19 award-winning projects span the globe—with six in Africa, five in Eurasia, four in Asia and the