



IN THE ZONE

GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL INITIATIVE AIMS
TO PROTECT AND GROW CORAL REEFS

BY SIMPLICIO PARAGAS





(First spread) Vibrant in color, healthy coral reefs provide habitats and food for a wide array of organisms, including starfish, jellyfish and sea turtles.

(This page) Considered “rainforests of the oceans,” coral reefs are communities of living organisms, which are comprised of plants, fish and many other creatures. They are home to approximately 25 percent of all marine life. Volunteers help with Outrigger Hotels and Resorts’ new OZONE reef conservation initiative.

(Opposite page) While snorkelers and divers do not pose the greatest threat to coral reefs, they should still adhere to certain ocean etiquettes: Do not touch the reef; do not stand on it; and do not break any piece off for a souvenir.

No reef. No beach. No destination.

It’s a strong message that Bitsy Kelley conveys whenever she speaks about our coral reefs. For the past couple of years, the Honolulu native has worked tirelessly to launch the “OZONE”—as in the Outrigger zone. The initiative is a global conservation program, which aims to protect and grow coral reefs in oceans surrounding Outrigger resorts in the Hawaiian isles, Fiji, Guam, Thailand and Mauritius.

“Growing up, I knew every coral reef intimately,” says Kelley, an avid surfer and vice president of corporate communications for Outrigger Enterprises Group. “I’ve got the scars to prove it. But I’ve seen first-hand what has happened to our reefs over the years; they’re dying.”

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP), healthy coral reefs are some of the most valuable

ecosystems on the planet, annually providing an estimated \$375 billion in economic and environmental services. Reef-supported tourism alone generates an estimated \$30 billion.

“We’re not the scientists,” Kelley asserts. “But we’re a great portal for scientists to connect with our guests.”

In partnership with NOAA, the Polynesian Voyaging Society, Waikiki Aquarium, Underwater World in Guam, Reef Conservation Mauritius and Pacific Islands Ocean Observing System, Outrigger Enterprises Group plans to transplant and grow a football field worth of coral at participating resorts over the next decade. It’s an ambitious goal but an achievable one, according to Paolo Maurin, Ph.D, Hawaii management liaison for NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program.

“I think it’s important that the goal is specific,” Maurin says. “It’s OK to be ambitious because that goal can be tracked and it can be quantifiable.”

With more than 60 percent of the world’s reefs under immediate threat, conservation is key to stem the damage—and possibly even reverse it. But to do so requires the efforts of science-based management, more education and prioritizing on-the-ground and in-the-water actions that address the top four threats to coral reef ecosystems.

“Climate change, acidic oceans, land-based pollution and over fishing are the main threats,” Maurin explains. “Some threats, like climate change, will go unabated but we can do things locally that can increase the resiliency of our reefs.”

Much of Outrigger’s program was inspired by an existing program at the Castaway Island Resort in Fiji where visitors are offered an opportunity to replant coral in the ocean. “In Fiji, we work with the nonprofit Mamanuca Environment Society, which helps educate our guests about the surrounding reef,” Kelley says. “Your vacation can truly make a difference.”

“In terms of science, it’s not that complicated; we know what needs to be done,” Maurin says. “I think it’s absolutely wonderful what Outrigger is doing. They have a tremendous reach with the visitor industry that we don’t have. It’s easy for NOAA to get the message to local residents but we can’t reach the visitor, who is an important stakeholder in preserving our reefs.”

In 2016, two international conferences that will focus on the world’s reef systems will take place on O’ahu: the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Council’s World Conservation Congress and the International Coral Reef Symposium.

“The IUCN World Conservation Congress has only met every four years since the 1950s,” Kelley says. “And the U.S. has never once hosted this weeklong conference, which will give us a chance to show Hawai’i’s reefs and present our OZONE initiatives.”

Climate change, acidic oceans, land-based pollution and negative impact of over fishing are the main threats. Some threats, like climate change, will go unabated, but we can do things locally that can increase the resiliency of our reefs.

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