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Preparing for Poachers



Helen Reef Resource Management Project Press Release September 13, 2003 Koror, Palau

When you're dealing with potentially armed poachers seeking economically valuable marine resources at a remote reef, you need to be sure that conservation officers are trained to cope.

That's the idea behind the training of six conservation officers and three community members of the Helen Reef Resource Management Project at the Republic of Palau's 10th Basic Police Academy, held earlier this year.

The Helen Reef Resource Management Project is a coral reef conservation project that operates in a corner of the Western Pacific -- an area of southwestern Micronesia that is bordered by the territorial waters of Palau, Indonesia, and the Philippines and contains some of the richest marine diversity on the planet. The Project's conservation officers are attending the academy to learn the basic prerequisites in law enforcement and are also receiving marine enforcement training with the national patrol boat under the Australian Maritime Surveillance Assistance program.

While there's a risk that poachers could be armed, the Project's Deputy Manager Wayne Andrew says there haven't been any situations involving guns at this stage.

"The poachers are not aggressive but there was one time when there were more poachers than islanders. For safety, there was no way to respond to that, we just told our boys to keep an eye on them." he says.

Wayne says with limited communication to the reef, little can be done if poachers get aggressive except leave the area.

"They have a satellite phone but sometimes it doesn't connect when they're trying to get through. So we tell the boys that if a vessel gets very aggressive, just get on our skiff and head somewhere safe. Their skiff is well-equipped with GPS and a depth sounder, so they can get around." he says.

He says that the risk is greater during full moon nights.

"The boys are really worried during nights when the moon is bright because the poachers can see where the waves break on the reef and they can bring the vessel through the passage and right to the island."

A recently installed radar tower, provided by private donations and external funders, will provide some assistance with this problem.

"It's good having the radar." says Wayne. "They can put it up and see if there are vessels round. On a clear day it can pick up vessels within 64 nautical miles."

It's mainly Phillipino fishermen poaching the islands while in the past there were also Indonesian poachers.

Wayne says having conservation officers stationed on the island since then has made a difference. "Before, when there was no one living on the island, [the poachers] would just come and take what they want. But now with the boys there, they're told to go back and the numbers just went down. Now there are no more Indonesian boats."



Helen Reef, situated in Palau is under the jurisdiction of the Hatohebei State Government and is a traditional fishing ground of Hatohebei Island, 40 nautical miles to the west. Uninhabited, except for three conservation officers, Helen supports some of the highest hard coral diversity known among Pacific Atolls with 272 species. The reef is 163 sq km in extent and includes an island that is an important overflight refuge for several species of seabirds.

The atoll is located 600 km south of the main islands of Palau and is consequently at risk of poaching by neighboring countries.

Hatohebei Islanders wish to conserve and sustainably utilize the outstanding biological resources of Helen Reef and so they have established the management project to build capacity that will help to eliminate destructive activities, counter illegal foreign poaching of the natural resources, promote wise use and management, and monitor the condition of the reef. The project is a collaboration of the Hatohebei Community, the Hatohebei State Government and the Community Conservation Network.

Funding for the enhancement of enforcement efforts Helen Reef is being provided by the New Zealand Overseas Development Assistance Programme, and the U.S. National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The Helen Reef conservation project is also supported by State and National sources and the John D. and Catherine T. McArthur Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

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