

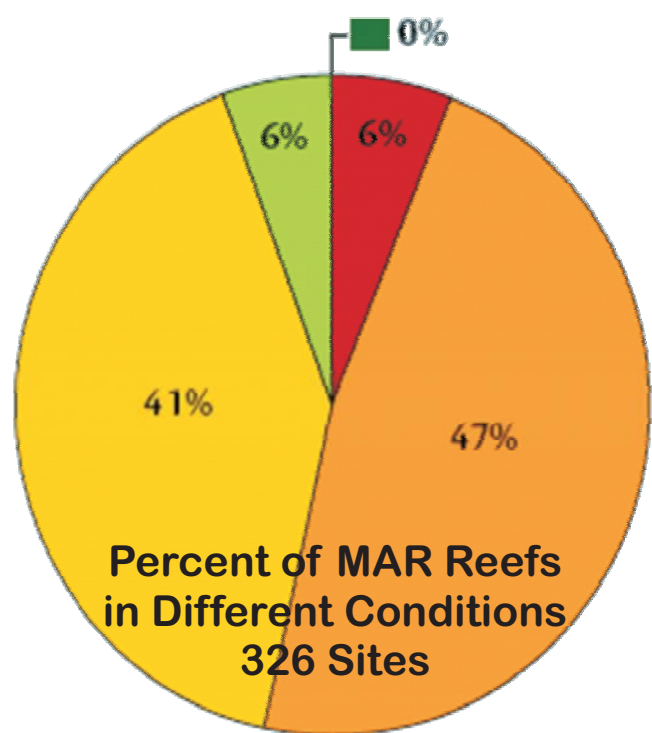
# First Eco-health Report Card Issued for the Mesoamerican Reef – Most Reefs are in Poor to Fair Condition

Press Release – Healthy Reefs for Healthy People – November 14th, 2005 – Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative released the first Eco-health Report Card on Thursday, November 13th, 2008, during the 2008 International Year of the Reef Symposium at the Radisson Fort George. Dr. Melanie McField of the Smithsonian Institution said “the grades are not encouraging, with most reefs in poor to fair condition. If my child came home with this report card I would take away the television and video games and get serious about their school work. We need to get serious about reef conservation.”

The spectacular Mesoamerican Reef stretches over 1,000 kilometers (621.3 miles) from Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula, through the entire Belize Barrier Reef complex, along the coast of Guatemala and out to the Bay Islands of Honduras. This vast reef complex and neighboring seagrass meadows, deep and shallow lagoons, and shady mangrove forests, forms a dynamic mosaic that nurtures the Mesoamerican “hotspot” of biological and cultural diversity. A few decades ago the Mesoamerican reef was considered to be in better condition than most other reefs of the Caribbean — but this distinction is now uncertain. Many of the reef health indicators (particularly for fish abundances) are now in worse condition than the Caribbean average and threats like coastal development and tourism are rapidly accelerating.

The Report Card presents an easy-to-understand overview of reef ecosystem condition and stewardship by providing a straightforward five-point grading system from ‘very good’ to ‘critical’ for seven reef indicators, combined into a novel Integrated Reef Health Index which synthesizes all the ecological reef data into one “Dow Jones” style index.

Because humans are a fundamental part of the ecosystem, the Report Card also describes the main threats to the ecosystem and evaluates our impact and management efforts through the newly developed Coastal Development and Tourism Development Indices. Environmental stewardship



and management are further evaluated through three additional socioeconomic and performance indicators.

This first Report Card (2008) shows the overall picture of a reef in danger, in need of immediate protection. Our collective efforts to manage the well known threats to reef health have not produced very encouraging results. Given the tight coupling between environmental and human health, there is great urgency to improve our track record of management. At the same time, there are some elements of reef health in good condition and others that can readily be improved through better management choices.

The 2008 MAR Eco-health Report Card is the first comprehensive health assessment of 326 reefs the Mesoamerican Reef Ecosystem (MAR). The reef data were collected in 2006 through the Nature Conservancy / World Wildlife Fund Rapid Reef Assessment, with the participation of many local and international organizations (including Greenreef, Belize Audubon, Friends of Nature, TASTE, TIDE, Earthwatch, and Wildlife Conservation Society).

Future Report Cards will be produced every other year through the Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative.

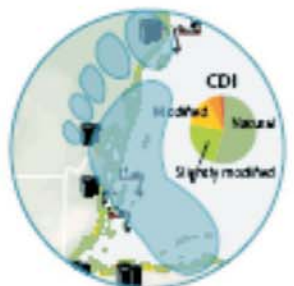
In 2007, the Healthy Reefs Initiative published Healthy Reefs for Healthy People: A Guide to Indicators of Reef Health and Social Well-being in the Mesoamerican Reef Region, describing four classes of 58 key indicators by which progress toward a healthy Mesoamerican Reef (MAR) can be quantitatively tracked. Then in 2008 the Quick Reference Guide followed with updates and highlights of the 20 highest-priority indicators and graphically illustrating their modern baseline values against reference conditions.

## CONCLUSIONS



### ABOUT REEF HEALTH

- The Mesoamerican Reef (MAR) is not healthy, on average scoring only about half the ideal Integrated Reef Health Index (IRHI).
- More than half the reefs sites are compromised, with 47% in poor and 6% in critical condition.
- Many reefs (42%) are in fair condition and could easily change for better or worse, depending in part on the effectiveness of management actions.
- Only 6% of the 326 reef sites evaluated are in good condition—and none ranked as very good.
- Healthy and unhealthy reefs can be found throughout the region, illustrating the importance of local management actions.
- Signs of poor reef health include low coral cover, low fish and urchin abundance, diseased corals, and relatively high amounts of algae.
- Even remote reefs, like the four atolls, are impacted, likely by overfishing and storm damage.



### ABOUT THE HUMAN FOOTPRINT

- Global climate change poses an additional overarching stress on reefs and on human society. Adaptation strategies need to be incorporated into all management plans and policies.
- Unregulated coastal development and tourism, overfishing, and poor agricultural practices are major contributors to poor reef health—although some economic activities such as tourism also present opportunities for conservation.
- Although approximately half the coast is still largely in a natural state, rapid changes are occurring around key population centers and tourism hotspots.



### ABOUT SOCIAL WELL-BEING

- Higher levels of dependence on marine resources, especially in the form of tourism, correlate with lower poverty levels and higher income.
- Harvesting of marine resources from the MAR remains the best opportunity for economic development in many areas where tourism development is not viable.
- Improving economic conditions of coastal populations presents an opportunity to improve environmental management and reduce pressure on marine resources.
- All four countries in the Ecoregion display mid-range Environmental Performance Index scores, suggesting some degree of environmental stewardship, but with considerable room for improvement.

“While the picture could certainly be worse, the report card signals the urgency of stronger actions to protect our reef,” said Dr. Melanie McField of the Smithsonian Institution, and Coordinator of the Healthy Reefs Initiative. “With so many reefs in fair to poor condition they could easily turn in either direction (for better or worse) depending on or current actions. We need to do the right thing for the reefs and the people depending on them to sustain their livelihoods”.