

Project Update: August 2002

The NRAS team (Natural Resource Assessment Surveys), comprising Marine Science graduates from the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI) together with visiting scientists and volunteers from Australia, UK, Germany and the USA recently returned from the expedition to the northern atolls of the Marshall Islands, Bikini and Rongelap. In total fourteen science divers were involved in the study of the health and biodiversity of coral reefs in the two atolls. They collected information that will be issued to local governments and international organizations that study the status of coral reefs around the world.

This research represents the first effort in describing the coral reefs of the two northern atolls since the late fifties. Before departure, five Marshallese graduates from the Marine Science Program got specifically trained, both in class and in the water, to learn coral reef biology and the special skills needed to monitor coral reef resources. The five CMI participants represent the first core of pioneer Marshallese marine biologists and conservationists dedicated to the preservation and sustainable management of natural resources in their country. All students are practiced SCUBA divers, and they became proficient in identifying fishes, corals and algae under water.

The first impression from the exploration of these two atolls is of particular richness, health and diversity. The team observed reefs hosting large fish, a high number of species, and a rich coral cover. Large giant clams are abundant, and many huge napoleon wrasses and groupers are cruising in the waters. Both atolls have had such a minimum human impact in the last 30 to 40 years, that their beauty and abundance of life is one of the best in the Marshall Islands, and it also ranges highly amongst the reef sites that the researchers have experienced elsewhere in the world. Next summer the same team and more trainees will be involved in additional surveys in the outer islands.

The scientists believe that the data that they will provide in their final report will be of great value to Rongelap and Bikini governments. The report will issue recommendations for a sound management plan that includes the installation of protected areas and eco-touristic sites. There is great potential for the whole atoll to become a globally exemplary reef management location and tourist magnet.