




International Year of the Reef 2018 – So What?

This is my first dive for 2018, the **International Year of the Reef**, and as I don my mask and roll in, I'm deeply reflective of the changes I've seen on our reefs, in my short life time.

When I first started diving, in 1988 our reefs were glorious. Now, I'm still amazed by their beauty, the ability to find magic under every crevice, but it's shabbier, there's more green and brown stuff (macroalgae), there are fewer fish and gone are the frequent sightings of big predators.

As I glide, I fondly remember George, the big, friendly barracuda that lived on the Stavronikita, thought to have been killed by spearfishers. More frequently, I'm seeing coral smashed to pieces by anchors and reduced are the massive colonies of star and starlet corals, our framework builders. It's amazing to me that we seem so insistent on trying to wipe out this ecosystem that has created our island and on which our lives and livelihoods depend.

Nowhere are my thoughts clearer than underwater, with the body and mind in a state of weightlessness, surrounded by a kaleidoscope of colour and my thoughts drift. So it's International Year of the Reef again. First declared in 1997 and then again in 2008, by the International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI) to highlight coral reef issues; we're here once more, ten years later in 2018, with the same old issues and new ones layered on top of them.

A coral reef is a gift that keeps on giving, but only if we take care of her. Her gifts, her ecosystem services are in decline and as we destroy her and her associated flora and fauna, we are also losing; her protection – the ability to save us from high intensity waves (think hurricanes and storms); food (think fewer and smaller reef fish), habitat for animals in our beautiful and barren seas and we impact our recreational spaces and our tourism product, as without her anchoring our beaches in places, they erode.

We know what we've done to our reefs, as the Coastal Zone Management Unit and the University of the West Indies (CERMES)



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have been documenting their demise very efficiently since 1982. We've lost around 50 per cent since the monitoring programme began and the decline started before that. It's not just us, regionally Caribbean coral reefs have declined from 50 per cent in the 1970s to less than 20 per cent today.

How have we managed to do so much damage to corals that have been around since prehistoric times and have always managed to adapt to changing conditions? Nutrient loading from our sewage, fertilizers, pesticides and grey water; unsustainable fishing, which has removed too many herbivores (especially parrotfish) that feed on the algae which grows in response to the nutrients; physical damage from anchors and careless divers; and finally, the most recent, Global Climate Change (GCC), which leads to coral bleaching and acidification. We'll talk more about these issues in the following months, but what is important here is that all, apart from GCC, are preventable by us, on this rock. Research has shown that if we control local threats, our reefs will be better able to handle global threats from GCC.

We've known all of this for years, so why are our reefs still declining? Why do we still allow unchecked nutrients to flow into our seas? Why are baby fish that have not yet had a chance to reproduce being caught? Why are we still building so close to high water mark on beaches that our protective sand is being eroded away? Why don't we have bio-degradable panels in our fish pots, so that fish can escape when pots are lost? Why do we not properly enforce our environmental policies and legislation? Why does everyone not know that it is illegal to destroy coral around Barbados? Why are boats dropping anchor on fragile corals? Why do we think it's okay to build in coral reef areas? Why are we still eating parrotfish? Why have we not yet designated the Barbados Marine Management Area (BMMA) that has been in the "pipelines" since 2014, aimed at managing and reducing negative impacts on

reefs?

The answers are multifaceted and range from outright ignorance to apathy, through to short term fixes for short term gains rather than a focus on long term sustainability of resources. How can we change this? It is not just a Government issue . . . it is our issue, and the only way we can save our reefs is if we have the desire and work together to do so.

We have to act now and in the words of our own esteemed Professor Kamau Brathwaite, who grew up on Carlisle Bay. . .

"One wonders where – and how – and when – a young poet grieving up or celebrating out today will find real growing green in our 166 sq miles of coralstone and stand if we don't stop soon to save what we have left – to take back, if we can some of what we lost spoiled/despoiled – before it is too late"

So, as my dive wraps up, so does my pessimism at being able to save coral reefs. Let us start by having a look at what we're losing. Let this be the year you put on a mask and head under, go snorkel, learn to dive (most diveshops will offer special rates for locals) or make the first step and learn to swim. Let us push for the designation of the Barbados Marine Management Area and better management and conservation of coral reefs. Fall in love with them and let's work together to save them.

We're planning to have articles on coral reefs each month, written by various actors and NGOs that are working on coral reefs, so keep reading.

(Angelique Brathwaite is a marine ecologist & dive instructor. She is a founding member of the Reef Keepers NGO and is passionate about coral reefs).

