

# Vanuatu Overview October 2011



Figure 1 Laying a Reef Check Transect

Our first destination for the 2011 OceansWatch expedition was Port Vila on Efate. Port Vila is the capital city of Vanuatu. It is where the main government offices are located and the main port for yachts checking in and out of the country. During our first visit in June we met Touasi Tiwok, in the Department of Environment and signed an MOU for working with them with the communities in the many islands that make up this country.. We also did our annual Reef Check training just outside of Port Vila and met the owner of Vanuatu's Daily Post who wrote an

article about OceansWatch which will help bring more awareness about our projects in this country.

We left Port Vila on June 18th to sail to Aneityum Island aboard our yacht, Magic Roundabout. The crew was Grace Phillips (Marine Biologist), Noelle van der Straaten (Marine Biologist), Rachel Mowll (Diver) and Ian Price (Skipper) under the guidance of OceansWatch CEO Chris Bone. We arrived at the most southern island Aneityum which has a population of around 1500 people. Near Analcouhat village is a small reef-fringed island called Mystery Island which has been designated as a Marine Protected Area (MPA) and includes a complete ban on fishing.

The activities on this island are the main income providers for the community of Analcouhat. We provided them with information on turtles, marine mammals and common coral and fish species found in the Mystery Island MPA. We also helped the tourism officer with Mystery Island ecotourism issues.

An important part of this visit was sharing marine education and awareness in the schools.

The next island we visited was Erromango on July 6th. We went to Dillon's Bay on the west coast. Erromango is extremely forested and has a Kauri tree reserve and a carbon credit centre. The main activities on the island are fishing and agriculture. The people of Erromango hope that the new yacht club will increase the number of visiting yachts and bring income that way. Also the expansion of the airport and the improved infrastructure may increase their income.

We met the acting chief of the village, Jason Mete, who warmly greeted and welcomed us to Dillon's Bay. They are feeling the effects of climate change including river erosion, salt water intrusion and changes



Figure 2 Custom dress in Malekula

in crop seasons. One of the lessons we taught in the school was about coral reef conservation and we also gave a talk to the whole community about this topic. We held some film nights with a marine documentary, a children's film and a climate change film. We had a lot of fun when we made a video of the Suvu Bay tabu area and had a snorkelling trip with the Chief and his family.

Magic Roundabout left Erromango on July 12th and arrived at our next destination which was North Efate and the islands of Nguna and Pele. The people of those two islands make day trips and sell their produce in the capital. Nguna and Pele were the first two islands to establish a MPA in Vanuatu. Currently the MPA has one major problem which is seriously affecting their beautiful reefs. This threat is the coral eating Crown of Thorns starfish (COTS). In 2011 they had already removed 20,000 COTS from the reef and hardly made a dent on the population. This is a real epidemic. We were asked by the community to help them by removing COTS from the reef at Unakap. When we arrived on the Unakap reef there were COTS as far as the eye could see, we removed over 700 COTS in 2 hours. We did a Reef Check survey at Nekapa, which is the newest MPA in the network and we also helped fill poly-bags with coastal seedlings to plant as part of an anti-coastal erosion project.



Figure 3 Noelle teaching at High School in Aneytium

OceansWatch's next destination was Lamén Bay on the island of Epi where we arrived on August 4th. Epi is on Vanuatu's tourist-trail due to the local dugong and turtle presence. Our main aim for Lamén Bay was to create awareness amongst the yachties and the community about the importance of protecting the seagrass area.

We planned to anchor in the same place as the 2010 OceansWatch team, away from the seagrass bed. When we arrived the bay, 3 other yachts were present and all of them anchored in the seagrass area. We explained to one of the owners that by doing so, they would destroy the seagrass in this area. His response was: „It's ok! All the yachts do it!“. This encounter shows us just how important our planned awareness work with the yachties would be. We also had two great film nights where we showed marine documentaries and children's films.



Figure 4 Checking for coral bleaching with CoralWatch

Our OceansWatch team then visited Labo in the south west of the island Malekula from August 9th to 13th. We had never visited this bay before, but whilst in Port Villa at the beginning of our time in Vanuatu, a Peace Corp volunteer stopped by our yacht and asked us if we could come this year. In Labo there are only 100 people, but the community members are very friendly and open-minded. The inhabitants earn income by growing kava and coconuts which they export internationally. They had already had one Reef Check training workshop and the community had

conducted their own Reef Check survey some 3 months before OceansWatch's visit. We gave them a presentation on litter and its effects on the environment and also information on mooring buoys. We also had a couple of film nights and a snorkel trip to find the best place to set mooring buoys; a project the community is looking forward to undertake.

The next stop was Port Olry on the island Espiritu Santo from August 24th to 28th. Port Olry is located on the north-west coast and it is Vanuatu's second largest town with a population of 2000-3000 people. Excess growth of algae on the reef encouraged us to test the water for colliform bacteria. These tests were conducted at 3 locations around the river and reefs.

The next stay from August 29th was on Sakao Island a small island in the north of Espiritu Santo which is uninhabited. The community of Hog Harbour uses the island sometimes for hunting and fishing, including tourist fishing trips and the occasional snorkel trip. We wrote a scientific report of our survey results for Alsen Obed at the department of Fisheries to

provide scientific backing for their proposal of turning Sakao Island reefs into a marine protected area. The owners of the island (Hog Harbour) have shown interest in placing mooring buoys in north-east bay and we will support this project.



Figure 5 Diving in Nguna

Our last visit was to Gaua Island to the villages Ontar and Dolab from September 1st to 4th. The villages are located in the Pwetevut Bay on the south-west coast of Gaua Island in Torba province. This was the first visit by OceansWatch to this community. The people on this island were very friendly and seemed very interested in OceansWatch and finding out about their reefs.

Overall while in Vanuatu we worked with nine communities and gave six school lessons on the marine environment. We also held eight film nights in the villages where we showed marine documentaries and children's films. To monitor the reefs we carried out twelve Reef Check surveys. However, where we make the most difference in these communities is in empowering the people and in building their capacity to manage their own resources and so become more sustainable for the future.