



# Saving the reef awesome, but someone has to do it

## Amanda Hodge

JOS Hill was still a landlocked British science student toiling away at the geographical midpoint between the frigid North and Irish Seas when the passion for tropical coral reefs first struck.

In 1997 the young student took time out from studies to volunteer with Reef Check International in Indonesia, diving its coral atolls and reefs to record diseases, pests and coral loss for a global data network.

She was hooked.

Within two years, she had a paid job with the same organisation, first in Thailand and then the Philippines, organising and training volunteers for the reef monitoring program.

But it was at an international coral reef conference that Hill was offered the "dream" job that set her up in Townsville with the Great Barrier Reef as her office.

"I really came over for a holiday and ended up staying and setting up the program, and it just carried on and kept on going," Hill says.

"Townsville has the world's leading marine scientists so I thought it was a great place to start a program and help other countries."

For marine scientists, the Great Barrier Reef is like the holy grail of research grounds, because it is one of the last intact reef networks in the world and under the stewardship of a developed country with the resources to manage it.

Since 2001 the 29-year-old marine biology masters graduate has trained and led a small army of volunteers on dive trips to survey and record the changes in some of the reef's most highly prized and heavily visited reef sites.

Most of her volunteers are recreational

divers, recruited from universities and the local community, who want to do something to help the reef and at the same time learn more about diving.

The survey season starts when the tourist season ends — around February — and continues until May.

It's then that Hill and her dive volunteers take to the reef with tape measures and underwater pens and begin counting the percentage cover of hard coral rock and sub strata — the main indicator of coral reef health.

The group is also constantly on the lookout for outbreaks of the crown-of-thorns starfish predator, algal blooms, and coral bleaching — three of the most significant threats to the reef.

Hill says the Reef Check surveys act as an early warning system of change "so if an organisation is interested in knowing where a species is, or coral bleaching is, I am able to tell my volunteers to look out for those things".

"Into the future it will be a lot more interesting to watch how the reef changes, and that will increase knowledge of what's going on at the reef because a lot of changes occur and we really don't know what's happening."

The results are analysed and fed into an international database, which is made available to scientists and managers around the world.

For the rest of the year, Hill recruits and trains volunteers, and begins the annual elusive search for more funding to keep the program afloat.

"It's a bit of a struggle with funding, but it's an awesome job," she says.