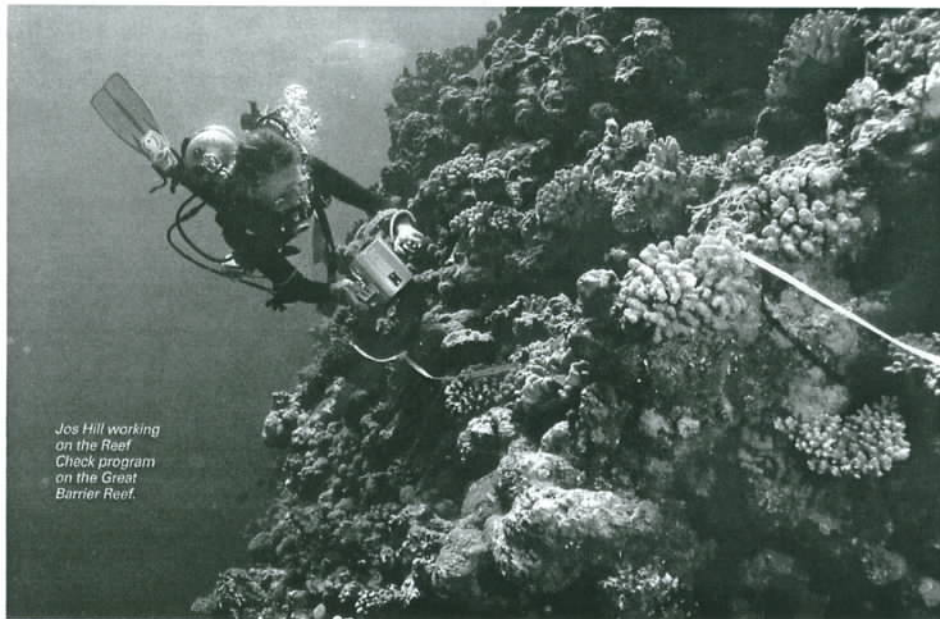


Reef Check keeps track of coral



Jos Hill working on the Reef Check program on the Great Barrier Reef.

Jos Hill started the Great Barrier Reef Arm of Reef Check as her masters project at James Cook University in 2001 and in just two years she became Reef Check Australia's Executive Director, still based in Townsville.

Reef Check provides an early warning system of changes to coral reef health using an online database by collecting data from diving on the reef.

"It's a really exciting tool. If you want to find out about the effect of water temperatures rising you can join information from the Australian Institute of Marine Science on rising water temps in say Nelly Bay and our information on coral changes in Nelly Bay. All the information is available at one online database," she said.

Jos Hill has been interested in the environment since she was a young girl in England.

After finishing high school she traveled to Australia to do community volunteer work planting trees and building fences.

It was doing this around Townsville when she first sighted coral whilst snorkeling off Magnetic Island's Alma Bay.

"I never really intended on coming back here, but then I thought I'll just pop back and then started studying here in 2001 and got stuck. I had started up Reef Check on the Barrier Reef so I thought I might as well finish it and here I am," she said.

Reef Check works with a range of other organisations to monitor coral reef health and involve the community in coral reef management all around the world.

It is a worldwide organisation founded in Hong Kong and now headquartered in LA, USA. More than 80 countries are currently involved in its projects.

"In Australia we report any interesting trends to other stakeholder organisations, such as when CRC Reef was looking for Golden Noodle Algae blooms, we were able to inform them of locations where this algae was present other than known locations around Cairns reefs," she said.

Jos said the hardest part was funding and manpower.

"Government funding for community projects is nowhere near enough. There is a lot of interest in the work we do, people from all up and down the Barrier Reef want to get involved, but at present resources are limited so we are just concentrating on the Townsville region at this stage. This means the project is small at present.

"We have more support from dive companies offering us free trips out to the reef than we can use up, but I guess it's a compliment to have this potential," she said.

"We are looking for scuba instructors who have extensive dive experience on coral reefs (for example, those with marine biology training) who want to get involved in running Reef Check courses."

Although she may now be an alumni of JCU she is very involved with the students, regularly giving talks at the University to try to recruit students to get involved.

"Two thirds of our current volunteers are marine science students. It's great work experience for them and can lead to them taking on more responsibility with helping to organise and lead teams which would really assist with the lack of trainers available," she said.

Reef Check is involved in numerous projects such as assisting with inshore monitoring as mandated by the Commonwealth and Queensland Government, Reef Water Quality Protection Plan. Reef Check also provided the third most reports to Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority as part of their Bleach Watch program, looking at coral bleaching.

However, it is not only locally that she is inspiring others.

"It's really nice when you see volunteers get really passionate and I've seen a few become environmental advocates," she said.

She has authored the Reef Check Australia training course which she uses locally and is currently repackaging it to be used internationally.

Last year she took eleven people to Vanuatu to assist with setting up a Reef Check system there. They collected some baseline data and trained some local divers and snorkellers to do Reef Check surveys.

"We hope to replicate projects across the globe. We also contribute to a global database which has information that has been gathered worldwide and can be compared," she said.

Jos is running a one man show at the moment and relying on word of mouth to expand.

"We really need to work on marketing as we need corporate support to get money for salaries so I can employ help," she said.

She graduated from JCU two and a half years ago and seems to have accomplished so much in so few years, but she seems to think otherwise.

"I think I left JCU, like two and half years ago. Wow, that's scary, when I look at it like that...I had a dream and didn't realise how long it would take, there's still so much to do," she said.

Reef Check: <http://www.reefcheckaustralia.org>

— AURORA DANIELS