

Reef patrol

Keeping an eye on our Great Barrier Reef is a big job, but necessary if we are to gain any understanding of the pressures imposed by humans and climate. Dan Bateman talks to the two people, yes two people, on coral watch

IN a small, dingy office in Flinders Mall you will find the headquarters of some of Australia's hardest working marine scientists.

They aren't exactly fighting to save the planet, they have enough of a battle keeping their tap water from turning brown - one of the 'perks' of being a non-profit organisation.

Despite their prime location in Flinders Mall, ask the friendly visitor information centre staff whether they can point you in the direction of Reef Check Australia and you'll be met with blank stares. They've never heard of them.

It may be a thankless job, but these reef surveyors are under no illusions about the job they do.

It's important, all right, it just might take 100 years for us to realise it.

The Reef Check story began 10 years ago when Hong Kong-based scientist Dr Gregor Hodgson asked the question,

"what is the health of the world's reefs?"

With enough coral to fill an area the size of France, this was not an easy question to answer.

Dr Hodgson needed help, stat. His call was answered by an army of volunteer divers, who he gave a very precise set of instructions on how to measure coral cover, and the health of reef systems.

They teamed up and surveyed more than 300 reefs in 31 countries and territories, finding, funnily enough, that while there was decline in the world's reefs, humans had very little impact upon coral reefs, even in very remote sites.

My how times change.

On September 11, 2001, the same day the Twin Towers in New York came crashing down, scientists released the most detailed assessment ever of the status and distribution of the world's coral reefs.

They

concluded that 58 per cent of the world's coral reefs were threatened by human activities.

Mere months after the Reef Check survey in the Indian Ocean, a storm decimated up to 90 per cent of corals in parts of the Indian Ocean - five per cent of the world's reef area.

We're now hearing that this trend could continue due to climate change, and things could get a hell of a lot worse.

Enter a young British diver who went holidaying in the Philippines and Thailand in 1999.

Jos Hill was so drawn to the world beneath the sea that when she saw an advertisement for Reef Check, she joined instantly.

There was no Australian chapter for the organisation, so when she travelled on to Australia, the Reef Check followed.

The program eventually led Jos to Port Douglas, where she worked with dive operators to survey the coral reefs of Far North Queensland.

From there, she headed to Townsville to undertake a master's degree. Again Reef Check followed.

With help from several funding bodies including, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, the Australian Institute of Marine Science and Townsville City Council, this was where Reef Check's Australian headquarters stayed.

Sunferries even gave them a home at their Breakwater terminal.

"It seemed to be a good place to stay because of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority," Jos said.

"With JCU and AIMS, Townsville is the marine biology hub of Australia.

"But not many people realise that."

Roger Beeden, another Brit who worked in marketing for the pharmacy industry, soon joined the team.

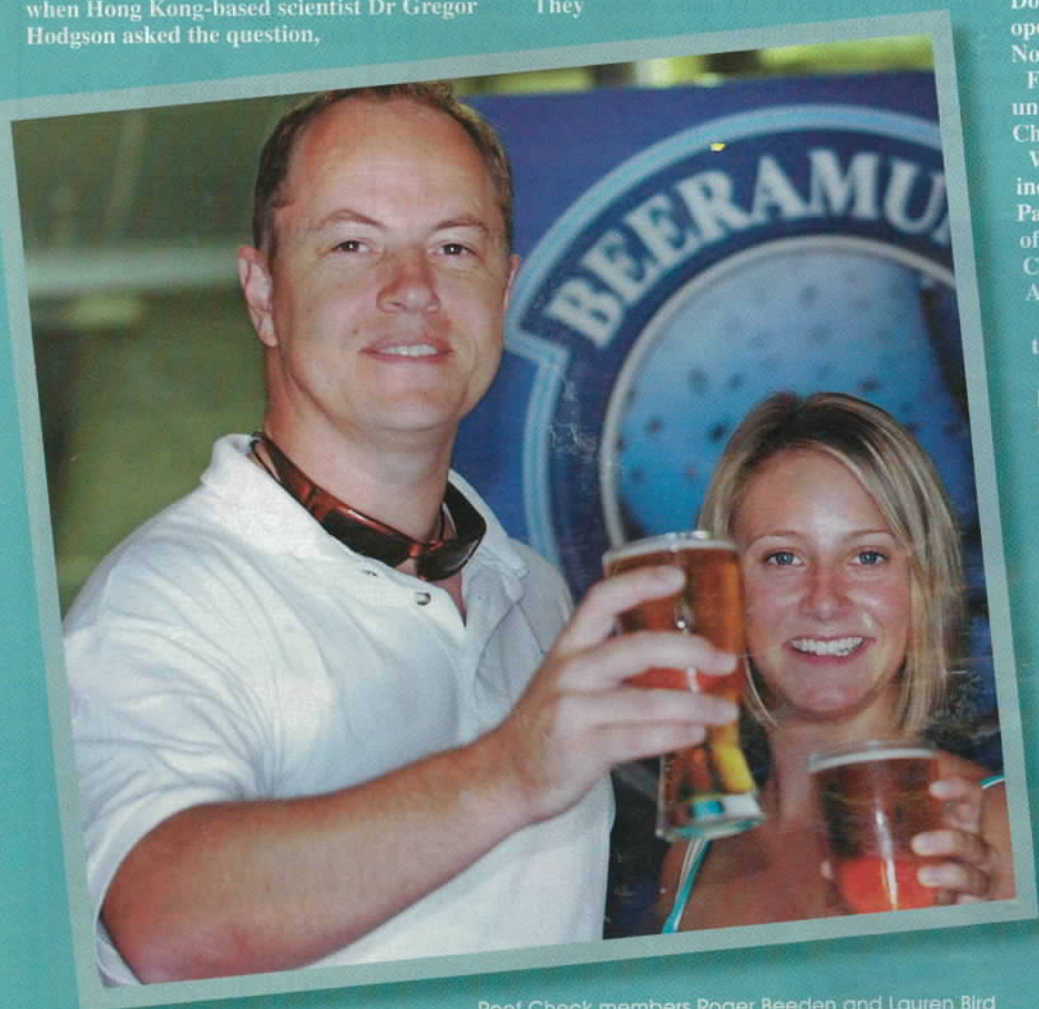
His marketing experience proved invaluable to the organisation.

Soon Reef Check was able to attract even more funding with brainwaves such as 'Beeramundi' - a beer creation by Townsville's Brewery, which donates a portion of the proceeds made from sales of the beer to Reef Check.

Last year, 1700L of the beer was sold out within a month of it being released. There are, of course, plans to make more Beeramundi.

The team has also released underwater coral viewing guides, where snorkellers and reefwalkers can jot down their findings and add them to a global database.

Roger said these days it had been



Reef Check members Roger Beeden and Lauren Bird toast the brewery's Beeramundi beer, a percentage of the proceeds going towards Reef Check, a charity



Jos Hill and Roger Beeden at work
Photo: Stewart McLean

a lot easier to attract interest in the Great Barrier Reef - something we can thank a little animated red and white striped fish for.

"It's very clear that the aesthetic beauty of it is one of the best things about it," Roger said.

"It's the Nemo effect. I think a lot of the footage people have seen on wildlife documentaries and in National Geographic has been really motivating and people are starting to see the connection between the reef and other industries.

"And there is a lot more understanding that reef tourism is big business."

For the past six months the pair was joined in their small office in the Tropical Bodies building by a public relations officer, Lauren Bird, who left Australia for the UK the day after our interview.

The young intern, who worked as a public relations officer at London's Covent Garden, said the biggest problem the organisation had was it was too busy to talk.

"When I started at Reef Check, they weren't very proactive about PR," Lauren said.

"There's no time. When journalists came and asked them about what they did, they tried to take the time to reply.

"But in the past six months, I've tried to consolidate plans for them to do more PR.

"The response has been pretty positive so far, especially from regional media."

A strong component of Reef Check's publicity campaign is recruitment.

It's that old 'many hands make light work' chestnut - with more volunteers, the organisation is able to monitor more reefs for longer periods.

At the moment there are about 60 volunteers committed to monitoring reef sites on a regular basis.

But with Reef Check teams in 80 countries, there are fortunately still reams of data for the experts to sift through.

Jos does not dive now as much as she used

to - she's too busy co-ordinating everyone else.

But the sites she has kept an eye on over the years have revealed some surprising results.

"There are a bunch of sites I do every year," Jos said.

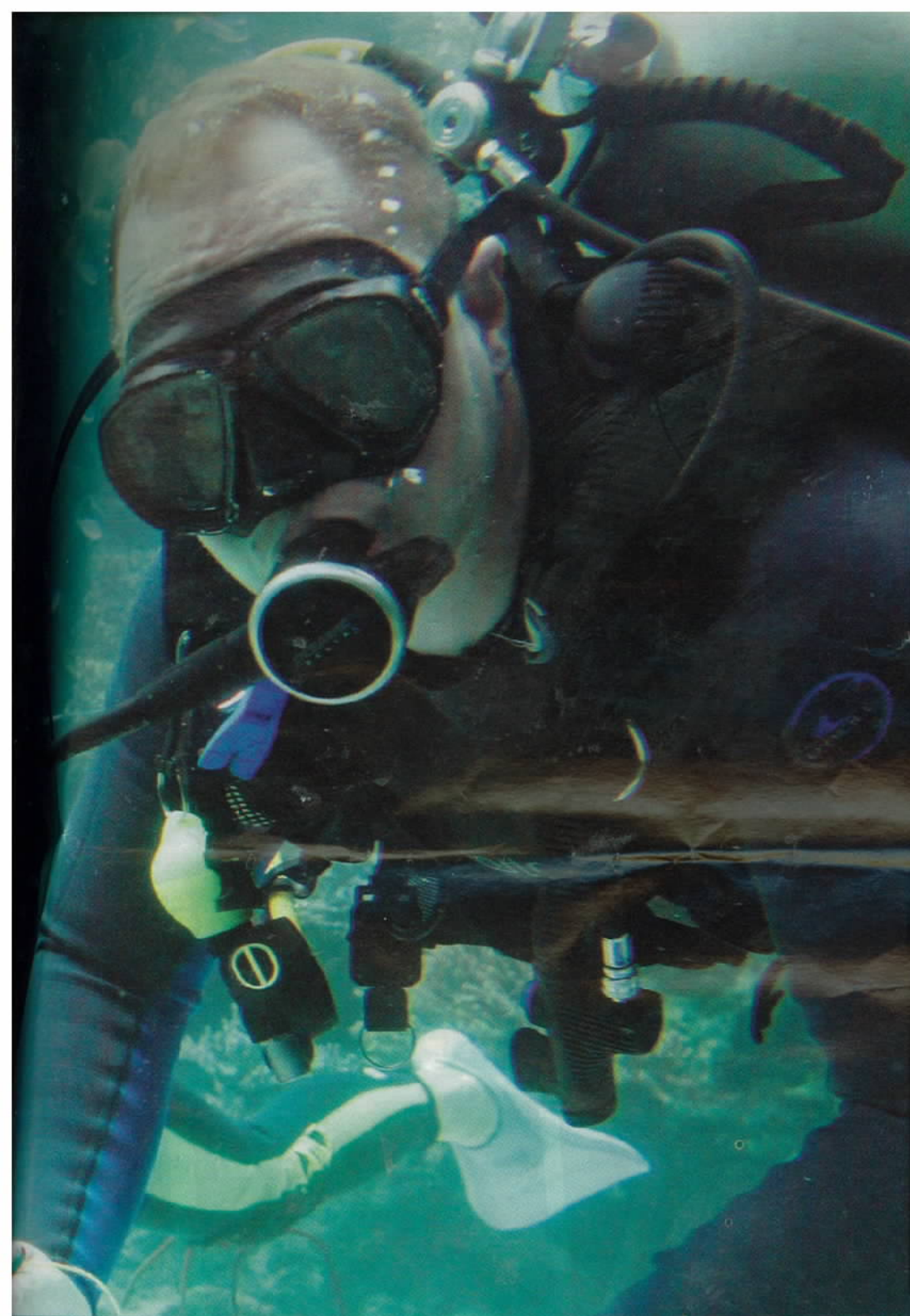
"My personal feeling for somewhere like Nelly Bay is the corals have improved.

"We've put a report together and it shows they are actually getting better.

"Other than that we have seen algal blooms come and go and there's been relatively little change on a lot of reefs.

"There are obviously sites where there are Crown-of-Thorns Starfish outbreaks, but hopefully we will see these ones recur and come out the other side in the next couple of years."

In the grand scheme of things, seven years of reef monitoring is nowhere near the amount of data we need to seriously make an educated decision about what is



HOW important is the the Great Barrier Reef to you? It's right on our doorstep and most of us take advantage of its presence.

Do you fish on it? Sail? Snorkel? Dive? Or enjoy it in other ways?

In celebration of Australian Biodiversity Month Reef Check Australia will hold a photography competition to demonstrate what Australians value about the Great Barrier Reef and what their concerns are about the threats it faces due to climate change and pollution and even, possibly, overuse. This is the first time Reef Check has run this competition and they hope for entries which show all the recreational and commercial activities which take place on the reef, as well as traditional cultural activities for many indigenous Australians, as well as tourism and harvesting the bounty of the reef.

Categories are: People and the Reef, showing the relationship between coral reefs and humans; Creative Visions of Coral Reefs, showing your vision of the essence of the reef environment in an imaginative or artistic way; The Reef in Our Hands which should highlight the dynamic relationships between humans and coral, the threats and pressures they face today and into the future; Animal Behaviour which should show memorable, unusual or striking animal behaviour on the reef; and Icons of The Reef in which entries should capture iconic scenes and or inhabitants of the reef.

The winning entries in each section will be reproduced as high quality prints and displayed at the Perc Tucker Gallery during September, Australian Biodiversity Month. The overall winner will get a brand new Canon A630 digital camera and underwater housing kit, and a weekend sail/dive trip.

Closing date for entries is August 31, and all entries must be submitted through the website at www.reefcheckaustralia.org.

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happening to the Great Barrier Reef.

We are, after all, talking about organisms which have been quietly building up their homes underwater about the same time the wheel was invented, 8000 years ago.

The danger we are getting ourselves into these days is what Jos describes as 'shifting baseline syndrome'.

"The most important reason to do monitoring is to establish baselines," she said.

"You could say the reef looks beautiful, but with six or seven years of visits, we can't say it's damaged because we don't know.

"We don't have the data.

"This is one of the really good reasons why we collect the data, so we have a good baseline to compare.

"We can suggest there has been some impact from human land use, but that's about it. So really the importance of this program is that it continues for another 50 to 100 years."

Whether there will still be a Great Barrier Reef for Reef Check to continue checking in 100 years is not known at this stage.

But in the meantime, the surveyors are prepared to do all the hard yards so we can at least have an enormous database for our scientists to go back and examine time and time again.

"As an international organisation, there's this perception that we're something like PADI," Roger said.

"There's this belief that we have lots of resources from the company.

"But what we do have is good experience of multi-tasking.

"Having worked for really not much financially, I can safely say it comes nowhere near the ethical and soul reward."

For more information or to join Reef Check, ring them on (07) 4724 3950 or head to www.reefcheckaustralia.org. Or pop into see them at Suite 5, Citilink Building, 358-60 Flinders Mall.