



EXPEDITION DIARY Honduras 2011

By Paul o'Dowd

8 March

Hello everyone and welcome to the Honduras 2011 diary. I'm Paul, your expedition leader, and you will be hearing from me regularly over the next few weeks. I am writing this from Muscat, Oman, where I have just finished with the Arabian leopard expedition.

Next for me is Honduras, and another tropical marine adventure, but the first for me in the Caribbean. With me to settle me in will be a much more experience hand, marine biologist John Shrives, who has been to Cayos Cochinos many times before. I am looking very much forward to meeting our research team and to getting my teeth into the Reef Check process there in what looks like a diver's paradise. The research base is a spectacular location. The sort of place you would think might be reserved for the rich and famous. Strange then to learn that we are amongst the only people permitted here as it is off limits to those outside the research community. So get ready for some great diving and some hard and satisfying work under the waves.

I'll see slot 1 at the Quinta Real on Sunday. If you are around and would like to go out for a drink before the official start of the expedition on Sunday morning (be there at 07.00 or miss the boat, literally!), then I or Jon be hovering around the lobby at 20.00 on Saturday.

I must be off to finish errands in Oman and then catch a flight to Honduras via the US. If you are still trying to swot up for the expedition, remember to read the published reports from previous expeditions available via www.biosphere-expeditions.org/reports.

So long

Paul o'Dowd
Expedition leader

15 March

I've just hit the ground in Honduras and I am finding it quite a familiar scene after my years in Papua New Guinea. It is beautiful, green, tropical and, from the plane, the water and reef look very exciting indeed. The temperature is around 30 Celsius and the weather is fine and sunny.

A reminder to all to make sure to change to US dollars before you get here. The airport money change outlets do not change any other currency and we do not have the ability to act as a backup for-ex service for those who aren't prepared. Expect an exchange rate of around 18.5-ish local units for the dollar.

Tomorrow I will meet Jon, our man for all things scientific and from there we will start the job of preparing the expedition for the team's arrival. Again, I am looking forward to meeting the team.

Finally, a bit of admin. My mobile number in Honduras is +504 98962241, Jon's number is +504 98947952. Remember these are for emergency purposes only, for example if you are going to miss assembly. Coverage on the island is intermittent, so you may not get through, but one of us is going to be in La Ceiba on 5 March, the day before assembly, in case you have any nightmares, so you should be able to get through.

See you all soon.

17 March

Jon and I have arrived on the Cayos Cochinos islands after a hectic couple of days organising provisions and logistics in La Ceiba. The island is a storybook picture of a Caribbean paradise. There are big iguanas everywhere under the coconut trees and giant ghost crabs patrolling the beach. We haven't been in the water yet, but it is crystal clear and warm (we know this from the drenching we got coming over in the boat). Tomorrow we will be setting up the lab and finalising the preparations in readiness for the team's arrival on the island on Sunday.

Just remember that water is a precious resource here and showers won't be available on tap, excuse the pun. Remember also that the boat ride over here is not a luxury cruise. Think about how to protect your stuff from the water, which will be coming over the gunnels as we make the crossing. Dry bags are good. Make sure you have all your paperwork for me when you land, i.e. checklist, insurance details, PADI or other dive qualification and medical paperwork, etc. And maybe keep it in that dry bag I mentioned, (not to labour the point, but my passport got soaked). Both Jon and I are looking forward to meeting you all.

20 March

A video diary entry is now at www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1 (and you do not need a Facebook account to see this, just click on the link and then go to the "wall").

21 March

Today saw the first aquatic day for the Honduras Reef Check expedition. The team of eleven are all experienced divers and after a day spent brushing up on critical skills such as buoyancy control, they are ready to go underwater with the tools of research.

The Cayos are a fantastic location, as the Italian film crew working in the region will attest. We find ourselves marvelling over hummingbirds, big iguanas, pink boas (not the feather variety) and fluorescent green tree lizards on a daily basis. That's to say nothing of the landscape.

Tomorrow we will be running the first trial underwater survey. It will be a challenging exercise as it entails the use of various apparatuses, the identification and counting of numerous indicator species and the usual load of regular diving-related tasks. I've no doubt the crew will shine in their duties.

23 March

A video diary entry is now at www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1 (and you do not need a Facebook account to see this, just click on the link and then go to the "wall").

24 March

As I sit and type, a huge iguana has just run over a merely large iguana in pursuit of a relatively small iguana. All a couple of meters away.

We are now well into the survey phase and the team has come together as a well oiled critter counting machine. The set-up of the sites for the Reef Check process is quick and the processing of the sites enjoyable and efficient. People are logging their data before lunch and with very little direction. All this after only two days on actual survey!

The HCRF crew are enthusiastic and knowledgeable. We have very capable dive leaders looking after the wet side and a great local scientist working with Dr Jon (see him in a new video diary entry on www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1) in the lab. I haven't even mentioned the weather and the viz yet, have I?...

27 March

A well-earned day off from survey diving was almost unanimously spent diving. The three team members who did not come to the Roatan Banks for a morning of pleasure diving, walked through the lush and beautiful rainforest of the island. Those who did dive the Banks saw something big. The first person to get in the water put their head under and came out swearing in three different languages. "WHALE SHARK" and the boat ditched its contents like a cliff full of lemmings. We spent the next 10 minutes following the worlds biggest fish as it rose and fell below us. I have seldom seen a more excited bunch of divers in nearly 25 years of diving. The Roatan Banks seamount itself was pretty awesome as well, absolutely pristine, with visibility at easily 30m and probably more.

Tomorrow morning we plunge back into the surveys, reinvigorated and doubly aware of what it is that we are working to protect.

30 March

The final day of data collection has capped off a perfect sequence of survey dives. The team did not need to repeat any of the numerous site surveys in the two weeks of intensive work. We had a dive without our slates to celebrate the completion of a very successful expedition. All that remains is to pack it all up and ship out, which we will do over the next day, our last on Cayos Cochinos.

Thanks to the team and the fantastic support crew from the HCRF. Stay tuned for some incredible photos and video which will be uploaded to the Biosphere website shortly. Meanwhile, a bit of fun from the team in Honduras at www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1. Don't try this at home ;)