



A SPLASH OF GREEN FOR THE RED SEA

By Xenya Cherny

Diving in the Red Sea's Gulf of Aqaba reveals a moving, technicolour vision that is simply breathtaking. But it's not just countless schools of fish and colourful sea anemones that one finds in these balmy waters. There are also bleached corals, marine debris, and the telltale sign of human presence above the surface: underwater garbage. The Royal Marine Conservation Society of Jordan, a Clean Up the World member, works both above and below the sea level to protect the country's unique marine life from degradation.

Some twelve years ago, a group of concerned divers decided to join the Clean Up the World campaign to prevent further damage to the Gulf of Aqaba. Led by Jordan's pioneer female diver, Her Royal Highness Princess Basma bint Ali, they founded The Royal Marine Conservation Society of Jordan (JREDS), the first and only national non-governmental organization dedicated to the preservation of marine resources.

With millions of tourists visiting Red Sea resorts each year, there is little surprise that its marine life – among the richest on the planet – is under significant pressure. The sea is home to dozens of globally endangered species, including Hawksbill turtles and Dugongs, and several threatened ecosystems, including coral reefs in the Gulf of Aqaba.



*The Red Sea is famous for its spectacular marine life...
(Photo courtesy of Rajae Joury)*

With many of Red Sea's habitats and species at risk, the initial task before JREDS was to assess the

the health of the reefs in the Gulf of Aqaba in order to create a baseline for future surveys.



*... and its underwater wrecks
(Photo courtesy of Rajae Joury)*

"Our goal is to establish a monitoring system to track the quantity and types of trash and to research its impact on marine life," says Arwa Helou, JREDS programme manager. To this end, JREDS activists have mapped the Gulf's sensitive areas to aid in monitoring underwater pollution and other environmental threats.

In addition to pollution and climate change that are already taking their toll on vulnerable species and ecosystems, another threat for the Red Sea environment – the spread of the crown-of-thorns starfish (*Acanthaster planci*) – has emerged.

This voracious and opportunistic marine animal feeds on coral polyps and has formidable defence apparatus which consists of sharp and highly

toxic spines. In absence of a natural predator, the damage the crown-of-thorns starfish causes to coral reefs is that of epidemic proportions, making it one of the world's worst invasive species. A single starfish can graze ten square metres of coral in just a year.

"To monitor the spread of this pest, we asked divers to report any sightings of the crown-of-thorns starfish in the Gulf and further offshore. We also keep a record of every reef where the starfish was found," says Ms Helou.

As the next step, JREDS organized diving expeditions to remove the vicious starfish and dead corals from the reef alongside underwater garbage – plastic, glass, metal, and other rubbish found on the seabed. Once cleaned up, these areas are ready to receive coral transplants from healthy parts of the reef.



JREDS organizes diving expeditions to remove dead corals and underwater garbage.



Coral reefs in the Gulf of Aqaba are considered a threatened ecosystem.
(Photo courtesy of Rajae Joury)

“Our first coral transplanting operation in the Gulf of Aqaba took place in 2003 and it was successful at the rate of 60 per cent,” Ms Helou says.

About 100 volunteers participate in the annual underwater clean ups organized by JREDS, and many more community members join in cleaning up the beaches and the town of Aqaba.

“We managed to involve people from all over the country in our activities: kids, tourists, local authorities, and many others,” says Ms Helou.



Kids from the town of Aqaba participate in the annual beach clean ups

Tourism is a booming business on Jordan’s 27-kilometres long Red Sea coast, and JREDS works with the local tourist operators to promote eco-diving and upgrading Aqaba’s glass boat fleet¹ to prevent damage to the reef caused by some boat operators.

In 2001, JREDS launched the “Plastic-Free Gulf of Aqaba” campaign, which was instrumental in reducing the amount of rubbish that ends up in the sea. Another notable achievement of JREDS is improved water use efficiency in the town of Aqaba. Water-saving devices introduced to large users such as hotels, schools and large businesses helped decrease water consumption by a quarter in just one year.



JREDS works to upgrade Aqaba’s glass boat fleet to prevent further damage to marine life.

But Ms Helou also points out that marine conservation goes beyond national boundaries. As part of an international Red Sea recovery programme, JREDS released some 40 endangered Hawksbill turtles back into the sea and works with neighbouring countries to breed additional turtles.

During the upcoming Clean Up the World Weekend on 16-18 September, JREDS activists will take yet another plunge in support of the



Clean Up the World appeal to clean up, fix up and conserve local environment. But this time around, it will be the Dead Sea.

Rallying under the slogan “Let the Dead Sea Live”, hundreds of volunteers will clean up what is the lowest inhabited site below the sea level on the planet. JREDS patron HRH Princess Basma bint Ali as well as other Jordan’s royal family members and dignitaries are expected to be in attendance.

It will also be the thirteenth consecutive year that JREDS is taking part in the Clean Up the World activities. “We are a small dot on the world map but part of a big campaign,” Ms Helou comments about JREDS’ long-standing involvement with Clean Up the World.

And as for the rest of the world, JREDS is perhaps one small initiative that is making big waves.

Xenya Cherny is a freelance journalist living and working in Sydney, Australia. This article is available for reproduction free of charge as long as due acknowledgment is given to Clean Up the World Pty Ltd and the author, and the meaning of the article is not changed. For more information on Clean Up the World visit www.cleanuptheworld.org

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¹ Glass boats are tourist boats with glass bottoms, which allow passengers to observe underwater life while sailing.