

HIGH



LIGHTS

2023



INTRODUCTION

Over the past year, the Mesoamerican Reef Fund (MAR Fund) has been dedicated to catalyzing positive change and fostering collaboration among stakeholders to address the myriad environmental challenges facing the Mesoamerican Reef ecoregion (MAR).

In this document, we invite you to read about the remarkable accomplishments and impact made possible through a collective effort with our donors and partners. As you delve into these pages, you will discover how MAR Fund's strategic investments and initiatives are contributing to the resilience and vitality of the MAR and the communities that depend on it for their livelihoods and well-being.



MAR+Invest

This new initiative, designed to attract investments that will provide environmental benefits for the reef while generating a financial return, is now in full operation. It is bringing together expertise in coral reef conservation, entrepreneurship, and capital to unlock private investment for initiatives delivering “MAR positive” outcomes. It is financed by the Global Fund for Coral Reefs and matching funds, and operated in partnership with Healthy Reefs for Healthy People (HRI), Sureste Sostenible (SS), Mexican Fund for the Conservation of Nature (FMCN), New Ventures, and VIWALA. Its Build & Connect Program, led by our partners SS/FMCN and with the participation of New Ventures, conducted training for 25 leaders forming the 2023 cohort. Mentorship sessions strengthening business acumen, fostered networking opportunities, and helped develop robust business models.



Simultaneously, the Acceleration Programme, overseen by New Ventures and with the objective of providing customized training to businesses making a positive impact on the reef, successfully trained its first cohort of eight projects. The accelerated projects are: Aquosmic, BioPlaster, Natoure, Sarteneja Alliance for Conservation and Development (SACD), Tela Marine, Thalasso, The Chilam Group, and Tobacco Caye Marine Station.

The initial portfolio of projects, selected during the development phase of the initiative, has commenced activities, including feasibility studies, the formulation of business plans, and capacity building. Among the diverse projects underway are non-contaminating shrimp farming and seaweed farming in Belize, mariculture of King Crab, blue carbon and biodiversity initiatives, and the implementation of sustainable fishing practices. These endeavors align with the program’s goal of promoting environmentally responsible business practices for the conservation of the reef.



MAR+Invest Acceleration Programme Launch Cocktail in Cozumel. Photo: MAR Fund

SAVING OUR PROTECTED AREAS: A LEGACY OF CARING

The project “Protection of Maritime Resources in Central America III,” funded by the German Cooperation through KfW, launched its first call for proposals. The primary objective is to support the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in and between coastal and marine protected areas (CMPAs) in the MAR.

This first call focuses on the CMPAs identified in 2016 as priorities by the four MAR countries. Thirteen CMPAs applied for grants; the results will be unveiled in the first quarter of 2024.

The assistance provided by The Summit Foundation and an anonymous donor in 2022 continued through 2023 to assist three MPA co-managers from Belize and Honduras. These emergency funds were instrumental in addressing operational expenses, including salaries, utilities, rent, equipment, and maintenance, thereby helping bridge the financial gap exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.



FISHING FOR THE FUTURE: SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES FOR A THRIVING REEF



The MAR Fish Initiative continues its mission to restore fisheries in the region by increasing knowledge about commercial fish spawning aggregations (FSAs) and protecting them. Key activities include ongoing characterization of Cayman Crown by HRI, patrolling and monitoring/searching for fish spawning aggregations by the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) in Belize, and educational workshops with local

fishing communities by Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación (FUNDAECO) in Guatemala.

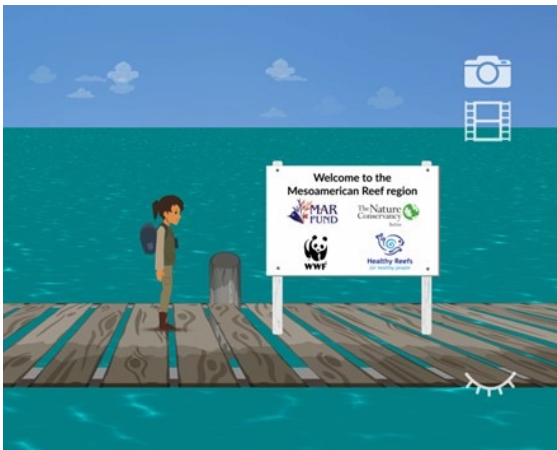
Comunidad y Biodiversidad (COBI) organized a workshop in Cancun, Mexico, with partner organizations that have implemented conservation actions at the MAR Fish project sites, to share and discuss advances and challenges and to plan next steps for the project.



Photo: Greg Ribaloff / Unsplash

Through the Small Grants Program, MarAlliance collected samples of silk snappers from Honduras and Belize to analyze connectivity and published an article in the journal *Reviews in Fish Biology and Fisheries* titled [The Impact of Small-Scale Fishing on Abundance and Size Distributions of Deepwater Snappers and Groupers in the MesoAmerican Region](#).

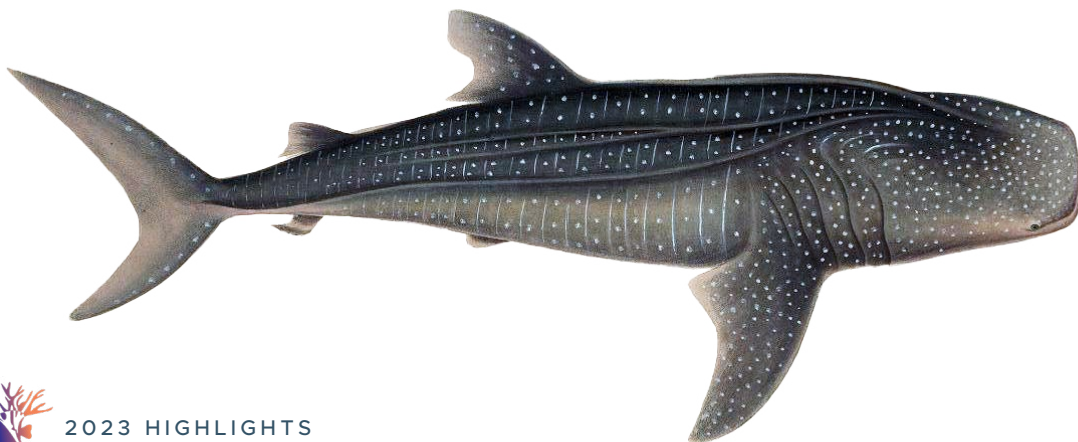
An entertaining and educational video game, [“Find the Whales - Mesoamerican Reef,”](#) was launched and shared across the region with a focus on ocean conservation in the MAR. This initiative was jointly developed by Thought Generation Society, The Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund, HRI, and MAR Fund. We thank the Oak Foundation and the French Facility for Global Environment (FFEM) for their support for the game.



Bird surveys at Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (CBWS).
Photo: CBWS

With support from The Summit Foundation, Sarteneja Alliance for Conservation and Development (SACD) conducted patrols to identify illegal activities, received training from the Belize Fisheries Department, and monitored fish, birds, and manatees in Corozal Bay Wildlife Sanctuary.

AN ENTERTAINING AND EDUCATIONAL VIDEO GAME, “FIND THE WHALES,” WAS LAUNCHED AND SHARED ACROSS THE REGION WITH A FOCUS ON OCEAN CONSERVATION IN THE MAR.



CLIMATE CHANGE: THE NEED IS NOW

Reef Rescue Initiative

The parametric insurance, which protects coral reefs against hurricane risk, was renewed for its third year, now covering 11 pilot sites across the four MAR countries¹. New sites for the term June 2023–May 2024 include Tela Bay and Cayos Cochinos in Honduras, and South Water Caye and Glover’s Reef in Belize. Funds for the premium were provided by the InsuResilience Solutions Fund (ISF) and the Adaptation Fund Climate Innovation Accelerator through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP/ISGAP).

Emergency response capacities were strengthened at workshops in Guatemala and Honduras, training Reef Response Coordination Committees on the Early Warning and Rapid Response Protocol. Two brigade trainings were held, one in Guatemala and one in Honduras, with a total of 29 new reef responders trained. All four countries of the MAR Region now have a Reef Response Coordinating Committee and an Emergency Response Plan for the sites covered by the MAR Insurance Programme.

In 2023, the planet experienced its warmest year on record, as confirmed by a comprehensive analysis conducted by scientists at NOAA’s National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI)². This unprecedented warmth triggered a significant bleaching event in the oceans.



Honduras brigade training. Photo: Martin Leglize

¹ The execution of this policy shall not have any effect with respect to, or in connection with, any sovereignty claims over any territory (land, insular and maritime) claimed by the Republic of Guatemala and/or Belize; nor shall it have any effect over the rights and/or claims of either country over such territory.

² NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information, Monthly Global Climate Report for Annual 2023, published online January 2024, retrieved on February 20, 2024 from <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/monthly-report/global/202313/supplemental/page-6>.



In reaction to this environmental challenge, Centro Ukana I Akumal A.C. (CEA) initiated a Bleach Watch coral reef monitoring program off the coast of Akumal in Quintana Roo, Mexico. Their findings revealed that 68% of sampled corals exhibited signs of bleaching, with 48% displaying paleness—an alarming indication of the impact of rising sea temperatures on marine ecosystems.



Mangrove restoration in Mexico. Photo: Cinvestav



Mangroves

The mangrove restoration and monitoring project initiated in 2022, restored 20 hectares of mangroves (10 ha in Mexico, 5 ha in Honduras and 5 ha in Guatemala) and restored hydrological flows by dredging 200m of channels in Mexico. This project is implemented by Centro de Investigación y de Estudios Avanzados del Instituto Politécnico Nacional (Cinvestav), Programa Mexicano de Carbono and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), FUNDAECO in Guatemala, Centro de Estudios Marinos (CEM) in Honduras and the Smithsonian Institution.

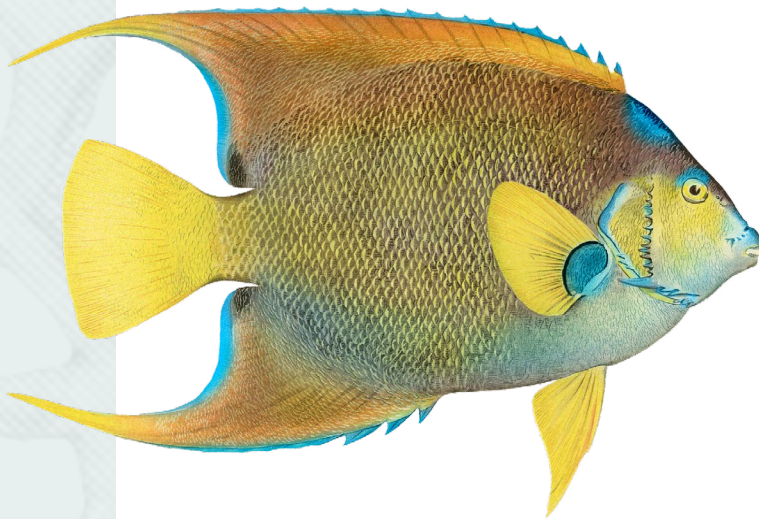
THE MANGROVE
RESTORATION AND
MONITORING PROJECT
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BELIZE MARINE FUND

In 2022, the Belize Marine Fund (BMF) successfully concluded its small grants funding round. Throughout 2023, it focused on the implementation of its previously approved targeted grants and follow-up and closure of projects approved in preceding years. Noteworthy achievements include:

- ▶ SACD built a Tourism Expedition Hosting Facility.
- ▶ The International Documentary Association (IDA) began creating a documentary to raise national and international awareness about the efforts of women leaders from various walks of life to preserve Belize's Barrier Reef Reserve System.



Tourism Expedition Hosting Facility. Photo: SACD

- ▶ The Environmental Defense Fund worked in collaboration with Turneffe Atoll Sustainability Association (TASA) to align FSAs data collection at Turneffe Atoll Marine Reserve (TAMR) with the MAR Fish Protocol in an effort to standardize data collection regionally.
- ▶ The Belize Audubon Society (BAS) successfully executed its Reef Protectors Program, engaging community members in reef conservation and marine resources management.
- ▶ TIDE integrated a hybrid enforcement system at Port Honduras Marine Reserve (PHMR) through underwater and aerial drones.
- ▶ ReefKeeper Belize conducted field trips and workshops for primary and secondary school students to build awareness about mangroves. They also contributed to the restoration efforts on Twin Cayes, South Water Caye Marine Reserve (SWCMR).

CLEAN WATER FOR THE REEF

MAR Fund's Small Grants Program continued to support projects addressing wastewater treatment and solid waste management.

In Mexico, Centinelas del Agua A.C. conducted an economic valuation of the hydrological services provided by the Yalahau Lagoon and its associated systems. It identified fishing, tourism, and agriculture as the primary economic activities, with tourism emerging as the highest annual economic contributor.

In Honduras, Polo's Water Association (POLOs) continued to improve the infrastructure of the West End wastewater treatment plant and their ongoing monitoring of water quality parameters of the plant to ensure compliance with both national and international standards. Plant improvement have reduced total nitrogen in the plant effluent, from 59.22 mg/l to an average of 10 mg/l during 2022-2023 and have reduced the fleshy macroalgae cover in the surrounding reef by 6.5%.

Fundación Hondureña para la Protección y Conservación de Cayos Cochinos carried out baseline studies on reef sites and the watersheds that influence them, to define their monitoring plan for water quality and reef health. Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD) was reported on six out of seven surveyed sites. They will monitor



the disease progression and water quality at all sites to identify potential sources of contamination and its impact on reef health.

Simultaneously, the Bay Islands Conservation Association, chapter Roatan (BICA-Roatan), conducted water quality assessments of seawater and freshwater in the CrawFish Rock community. Results are being analyzed and will contribute to a better understanding of the marine environment and people's health in that area.

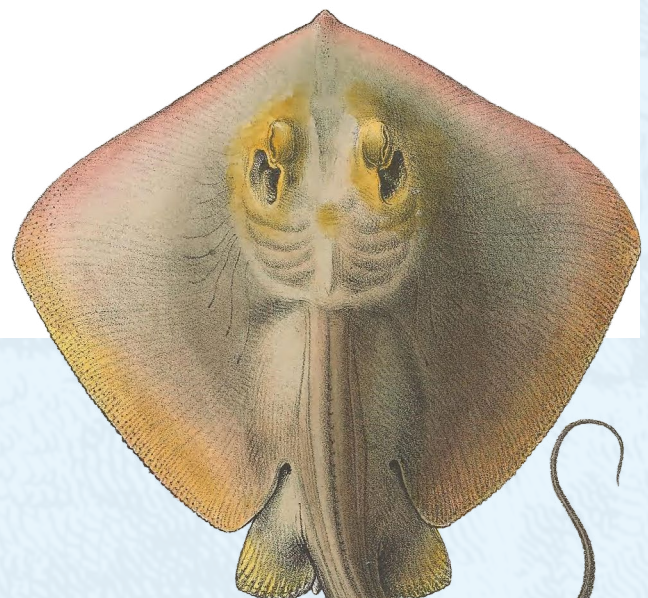




Photo: Shutterstock

SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM

In 2023, the 16th request for proposals of the Small Grants Program (SGP) featured two financing windows: Traditional and Reef Rescue Initiative. Twenty eligible proposals were received, and the list of winners will be announced in 2024.

The SGP has supported projects in all MAR Fund programs, adapting and modifying its focus to respond to the needs of the region.

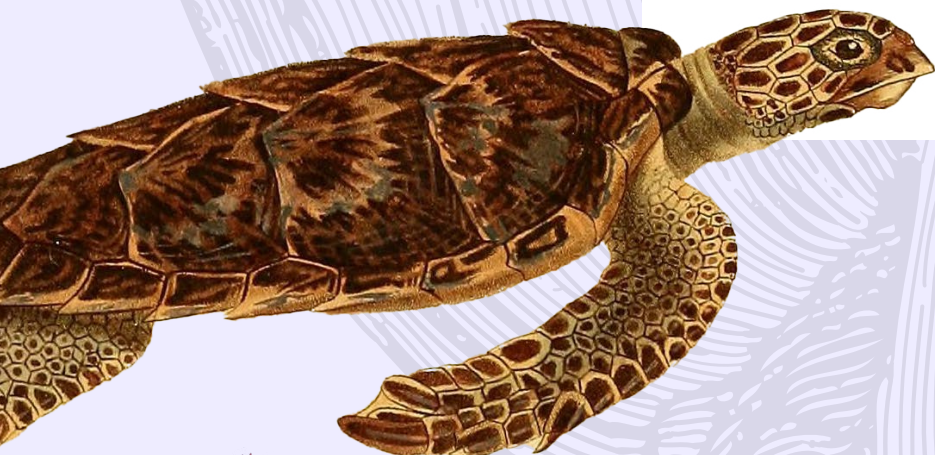
MAR FUND OPERATION

Recognizing the significance of sharing successful stories and lessons learned by our partners in the field, the MAR Fund Webinar series continued throughout 2023, garnering significant attendance and interest from diverse stakeholders. With 12 webinars held, the series reached 2,687 individuals.

To increase the potential positive impacts of projects supported by MAR Fund and reduce their risks, MAR Fund continued to implement its Environmental and Social Management System in 2023. Eleven projects have been completed in full compliance with their Environmental and Social Action Plans (ESAPs).

As of December 2023, MAR Fund had raised USD 39.6 million in project funding, USD 14.3 million in sinking funds and managed an endowment of USD 32.1 million.

MAR Fund developed its 2024-2028 strategic plan which provides new strategic guidance for the organization's continuing efforts to conserve, restore and promote the sustainable use of the Mesoamerican Reef.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



We extend our deepest gratitude to all our donors, partners—government agencies, bilateral organizations, foundations, NGOs, local communities, businesses, and individuals—, our Board of Directors and members of our advisory committees, who play an integral role in our journey towards safeguarding the MAR. Together, we have demonstrated the profound impact that can be achieved when we unite behind a shared vision of environmental stewardship and sustainability.

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- Ari Bluer
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- Fondo de la Iniciativa para las Américas
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- Small Grants Program Grants and Evaluation Committee
- Technical Supervisory Committee of the Reef Rescue Initiative

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