



MAR Fund: 2020 at a glance

Roatan, Honduras
Credit: Rick Miskiv / Coral Reef Image Bank



Introduction

2020 was a challenging year worldwide. The pandemic changed the way we do things, the way the world works and the way we look at the future.

MAR Fund continued to operate at its best capacity, with our staff and partners in the four countries working from home. Thanks to our responsive Board and staff, and especially our donors, who were flexible enough to change the way some projects operate, we were able to address the needs of our grantees in these difficult times.

Most of our grantees continued to develop some level of their programmatic activities, adapting to the different restrictions in their countries. Several requested time extensions and budget modifications to cover salaries and/or to support the local communities they work with.

We acknowledge and thank our partners and grantees for their hard work and commitment to the conservation of the MAR, even under the difficult conditions faced in 2020. It is a privilege to work with them.

The MAR Fund operates through five programs and we are happy to share an update on advances in 2020.



Credit: Fundación Albatros

Saving our protected areas: a legacy of caring

KfW is among the largest supporters for conservation in the MAR. Phase II of the Project *Conservation of Marine Resources in Central America* finalized activities in June. The objective of the project was to consolidate priority coastal and marine protected areas and ensure the sustainable use of their natural resources in the mid-term. Between phases I and II of the project, nine protected areas, prioritized by key stakeholders and governments, were strengthened in different topics (management plans, operation, control and surveillance, among others), 19 governance platforms were created/ strengthened, more than 20 community development initiatives were launched, and over 2,000 people were trained. We have maintained constant communication with KfW and we continue to work together on the design of Phase III.

Oak Foundation has also been a key partner and funder in the Mesoamerican Reef. Although they have now exited the region, they provided support for over 15 years and through the project "Re-granting in the Mesoamerican Reef", seven grantees in the region developed important initiatives. During 2020, four organizations were strengthened in different areas such as control and surveillance, research and monitoring, financial sustainability, and establishment of a Fish Replenishment Zone (FRZ). Approximately 500 stakeholders from the seven projects were trained and/or involved in management of natural resources.



Credit: Philip Hamilton / Coral Reef Image Bank

Fishing for the future: sustainable fisheries for a thriving reef

We continue to strengthen a regional fish spawning aggregation (FSA) network through the MAR Fish initiative. FSA are temporary gatherings of large numbers of fishes that come together at a specific location to spawn, and are critically important for marine ecosystem health and food security. With financial support from the French Global Environment Facility (FFEM) and The Summit Foundation, monitoring of 9 FSA is being supported (2 in Mexico, 3 in Belize, 1 in Guatemala and 3 in Honduras). In spite of the situation posed by COVID-19, exploration visits to four FSA took place.

Some of the studies/documents generated by this initiative, also supported by Marisla Foundation, include:

- [*Characterization of the Use of Resources in the Cayman Crown Reef, Based on Information from User Communities of the Gulf of Honduras.*](#) Fifty-six fishers from Belize, Honduras and Guatemala provided information on their fishing activities in the Cayman Crown Reef.
- [*Fish Spawning Aggregation Monitoring in the MAR Fish Network.*](#) As a result of the workshop carried out in November 2019, this document contains the standardized methodology for monitoring FSA in the region.

- [*Status Report on Fish Spawning Aggregations in the Mesoamerican Reef.*](#) A desk-top revision of the 36 FSA sites reported for the region was developed through online surveys, interviews with key stakeholders and managers in Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras, as well as an extensive revision of scientific publications and grey literature. Of the 36 FSAs reported, 24 have been visually verified, 22 are protected, and 8 present temporal protection.
- [*Policy Brief on Fish Spawning Aggregations*](#) with the objective of increasing the level of understanding on the importance of FSAs and the need for their effective protection region wide.

The magnificent Cayman Crown reef, only discovered to science a few years ago and shared between Guatemala and Belize, has been protected by both countries, as a ten-year fish replenishment zone in Guatemala, and as an expansion of a protected area in Belize. We are supporting research (ecological characterization of the reef and FSAs) and initial management in both areas, through the kind contributions of FFEM, Oceans 5, The Summit Foundation and Marisla Foundation, and continue to fundraise for this unique jewel of the MAR.



Credit: Patric Lengacher

Climate Change

In March we released, with the Smithsonian Institute, the *Regional Strategy for Mangrove Management, Conservation, Restoration and Monitoring in the Mesoamerican Reef*, resulting from a regional workshop in September 2019, supported by the German Embassy in Guatemala and the project “Integrated ridge to reef management of the Mesoamerican Reef Ecoregion (MAR2R)” by CCAD/WWF/GEF. We are now supporting the elaboration of the *Manual for Mangrove Restoration in the Mesoamerican Reef*, jointly funded by the Cartagena Convention-UNEP, the MAR2R/CCAD/WWF/GEF Project and MAR Fund.

Through our Reef Rescue Initiative, we are working to design a parametric insurance model for emergency reef restoration response after a hurricane in seven pilot sites of the MAR Region, in collaboration with Willis Towers Watson (WTW). In September, a grant was approved for this purpose in the framework of the Ocean Risk and Resilience Action Alliance, through Stockholm University and the Global Resilience Partnership with funding from Global Affairs Canada.

As part of this process, and in collaboration with TNC, we are working to develop and implement Emergency Response capacities in the four countries. The Fisheries Department of Belize has confirmed their commitment to strengthen their emergency response capacities, and in January 2020 their Post Storm Coral Response Plan was

finalized. We have also signed a collaboration agreement with the Government of Honduras to formalize the country’s commitment to building post-storm response capacities. In Mexico, the Advisory Board of Banco Chinchorro Biosphere Reserve and Xcalak Reefs National Park approved the emergency response capacities for those protected areas. In 2020, the three countries created Emergency Response Coordinating Committees. MAR Fund and TNC conducted virtual training courses on Post Storm Coral Recovery Response.



Credit: Puerto Morelos’ emergency brigades



Credit: Puerto Morelos' emergency brigades

An Emergency Fund was established as a financial mechanism to provide immediate funds for emergency response reef restoration actions in the MAR. It was first deployed in October 2020 in response to the affected corals in three reef sites of the Puerto Morelos National Park in Quintana Roo, Mexico, following tropical storm Gamma and hurricane Delta. With the funds granted, emergency response brigades were able to provide immediate attention to reef restoration after the events hit the area. This prompt assistance resulted in 2,152 stabilized colonies, 5,143 fragments cemented to the reef, and 8,428 coral fragments braced, in the three reef sites of the National Park.

The MAR Restoration Network has an active Executive Committee, 52 members from 66 organizations and a website to share information on coral restoration. A Technical Restoration Guide was completed, as well as five videos to facilitate training on reef restoration practices. The videos include recommendations from experts from the network. These can be downloaded from the website (www.coralmar.org).

To address the Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD) in the region, a workshop was held in Belize in late 2019, organized by MAR Fund's Belize Marine Fund and Reef Rescue Initiative. It brought together practitioners and experts from the region and beyond. The results and recommendations stemming from this workshop were included in a [special report](#), which was distributed among key stakeholders in the region in April.

In August, with the support of the MAR2R project of CCAD/WWF/GEF, and in coordination with the four countries of the MAR, a Regional SCTLD Working Group was created. The Group is the governance platform to promote the creation of capacities and action plans to address this disease in the region. It is formed by government representatives and experts in coral reef conservation, MAR Fund and MAR2R representatives. The Group had two ordinary meetings and will continue working in 2021.

Clean water for the reef

Through the 11th and 12th Requests for Proposals of the Small Grants Program, six projects related to solid waste management, water quality and raising awareness on solid waste and sewage treatment in the region are being supported. Some examples include:

In Mexico, the Auxiliary Bodies of the Yucatan Peninsula Watershed Council in the municipality of Lázaro Cárdenas were established. There were also two water quality monitoring campaigns (January and July 2020) in Yalahau lagoon in the Yum Balam Flora and Fauna Protected Area. Results show that the lagoon has a tendency of being eutrophic. It is also important to mention that, based on the bacteriological concentration, the lagoon is vulnerable to groundwater discharge, especially near Chiquilá and Holbox. In addition, 431 community members have been sensitized on the importance of clean water and its protection.

Also in Mexico, 34 tourism service providers from seven different protected areas in Quintana Roo were trained in best practices for aquatic activities including proper use and disposal of solid waste.



Credit: Casa Wayuú

In Roatan, Honduras, the solid waste collectors were trained, and they established the Roatan Recycling Association. Equipment was purchased to facilitate their activities. In order to understand how trash arrives at the beaches, drift cards were deployed and solid waste from Mexico and Belize was registered. Three resorts have implemented solid waste management plans. A total of 910 students were trained and sensitized on management of sewage and solid waste and more than 1,000 community members were informed about the importance of reducing the use of plastic items. The POLO's water treatment plan infrastructure is being improved to enhance its financial sustainability and to reduce the entrance of untreated wastewater into the reef system. In Pensacola, another community in Roatan, a rainwater catchment system was installed at Lunsford Johnson School.



Credit: Polo's Water Association

Belize Marine Fund

The Belize Marine Fund (BMF), our only country-focused program, currently has five targeted grants and nine small grants in development. Some of the topics being supported include: understanding the resilience potential of targeted Marine Protected areas; effective management of marine protected areas; providing a national response to the Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease; evaluating new economic activities in Belize, such as sea cucumber mariculture; responsible fisheries management; replenishment zones extension and developing a branding and marketing strategy for the Belize Barrier Reef World Heritage Site.

The BMF derived from the challenge grant offered by Oak Foundation as they were exiting the region. They committed to donate US\$10 Million in endowment funds if MAR Fund raises US\$15 Million, also in endowment funds. As part of the MAR Fish project, FFEM has made a grant of US\$510,444 to establish an endowment for the Cayman Crown protected areas, as the initial contribution to the challenge.



Credit: Belize Audubon Society

Financial Support

To support conservation initiatives in the region, MAR Fund operates through different funding channels. One of them, the first one to be established, is our Small Grants Program, which closed its 13th Request for Proposals (RfP) in 2020. It now has three windows: Traditional Small Grants, Reef Rescue Initiative and Belize Marine Fund. This year's RfP has a focus on supporting actions to strengthen the resilience of NGOs, protected areas and coastal communities, so they may be better prepared to respond to future natural or anthropogenic-caused events.

Another channel is through specific projects. Thanks to the MAR2R/CCAD/WWF/GEF project, we are currently carrying out an initiative to involve local communities in the conservation and restoration of mangroves and coral reefs and promote good practices in sustainable fisheries, among other activities.

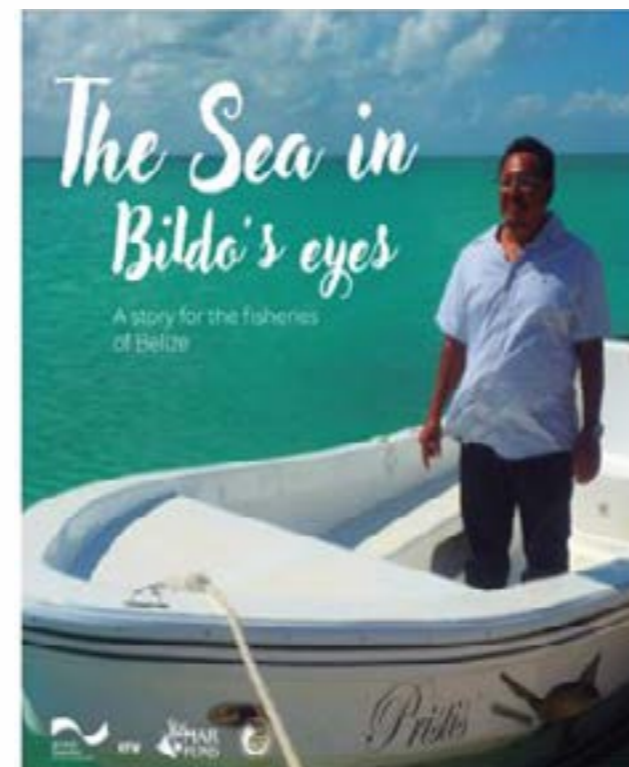
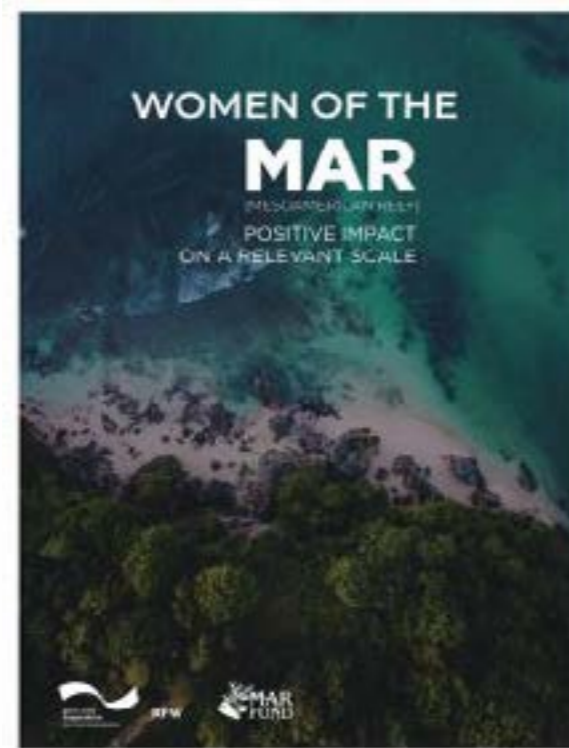
With financial support from The Summit Foundation, emergency funding has been provided to five MPA co-managers in Belize to sustain their operations at a reduced level. This will allow these organizations to navigate the loss of tourism income due to COVID-19 and to protect Belize's marine resources.



Credit: Philip Hamilton / Coral Reef Image Bank

Communications

We like to keep our partners, donors and followers informed and up to date on the latest developments. To do so, we use different communication tools (monthly newsletters, snapshots published in [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and the MAR news section on our [website](#)). During 2020, we also published the following books: [Written in Blue Ink 2](#), [Women of the MAR](#) and [The Sea in Bildo's eyes](#).



Credit: Philip Hamilton / Coral Reef Image Bank

MAR Fund 15 years

In 2020, MAR Fund turned 15. During these years, we have supported and participated in establishing strategic regional alliances, such as the Connectivity Network, the Reef Restoration Network, the Sustainable Fisheries Network and the Fish Spawning Aggregations Network. It is also part of the Healthy Reefs Initiative, an international effort that measures and tracks the health of coral reefs in the region, and the MAR Leadership Program, a capacity- building initiative that strengthens leadership skills of young conservationists in the four MAR countries and scales impact through support of their strategic projects.

To celebrate our 15th anniversary, we launched the photography contest [15 years of conservation in the MAR](#), to showcase the wonderful work and the great impact that our partners have had in the region. The three winners of the contest were selected by the vote of our social media followers.

As of December 2020, MAR Fund managed a US\$30.4 Million endowment and had raised US\$28.1 Million of project funding. One hundred eight small grants have been awarded to 45 NGOs, 5 government agencies and 25 community groups, approving a little over US\$3 Million and leveraging over US\$5 Million. In addition, MAR Fund has implemented 5 large, multiannual projects, supporting 16 partners (NGOs, government, academia, fishers, others) in the region.

It has been a busy 15 years and we could not have done it without the support of our partners and donors. Together, we will continue to drive regional funding and partnerships in the Mesoamerican Reef Region for its conservation restoration and sustainable use.



Credit: Ana Beatriz Rivas/MAR Fund

Acknowledgements

MAR Fund would not be able to advance without the valuable support and trust of its donors and partners. Thank you to our individual donors in 2020: John Elliot, Desiree Solte, Gina De Ferrari, Sandy Sheehy and Michael Milczarek; and to FFEM, KfW, MAR2R/CCAD/WWF/GEF Project, Global Giving, National Geographic Society, Oak Foundation, Paul M. Angell Family Foundation, Marisla Foundation, The Summit Foundation and Oceans 5, a sponsored project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, Inc. We also want to thank the Ocean Risk and Resilience Action Alliance and Global Affairs Canada for their support through the Stockholm University, Stockholm Resilience Centre and Global Resilience Partnership.

Finally, we want to recognize the unfailing guidance and support provided by our Board of Directors and Committees.



Credit: The Ocean Agency / XI Catlin Seaview Survey