



Regional Demonstration Project for Action Planning against Tissue Loss Disease in Stony Corals (SCTLD)

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REEF MANAGEMENT
OF THE MESOAMERICAN
REEF ECOREGION PROJECT
(MAR2R)



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The Mesoamerican Reef Ecoregion (MAR) has been facing, since 2018, an unprecedented new disease called Stony Coral Tissue Loss Disease (SCTLD), which affects over 34 stony coral species in the Caribbean.¹ It represents a particularly important threat to reefs due to its wide geographic range, extended duration, and high mortality rates. SCTLD impacts reef health and has triggered an urgent need for response at the local, national, and regional levels.

The Regional Demonstration Project for Action Planning against SCTLD is being developed within the framework of the "Integrated Ridge to Reef Management of the Mesoamerican Reef Ecoregion" (MAR2R) project, implemented by the Central American Commission on Environment and Development (CCAD), in coordination with the Ministries of Environment of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras, with funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

This demonstration project was carried out with support from the Mesoamerican Reef Fund (MAR Fund), with the goal to respond to the SCTLD threat and promote governance in the ecoregion through capacity building among relevant partners.

RESULTS

1. Strengthening of regional articulation and coordination for the attention of SCTLD by putting together and activating a Regional Dialogue Group (RDG).

This RDG, which operated between July 2020 and October 2022, holding bimonthly meetings², is the technical governance of the project that aims to create and strengthen capacities in the region for the attention of SCTLD, in coordination with experts, local communities, and the scientific and academic community, as well as to articulate with government agencies.



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The RDG comprises 11 members, including representatives of government agencies responsible for biodiversity and marine-coastal resources in each country of the MAR and members of MAR2R Project, CCAD, WWF, and MAR Fund.

Furthermore, to propose strategies to address SCTLD and obtain recommendations and scientific, technical, strategic, and/or political advocacy support for addressing the disease, the RDG created the Regional Advisory Group (RAG), comprised of five (5) experts on reef conservation and monitoring, and environmental advocacy.

The proposed follow-up actions include:

- 1) Promote the RDG from the Committee of Seas and Biodiversity of the CCAD.
- 2) Develop and submit a joint annual report to the CCAD and potential donors, including chapters per country on the progress and strategies for addressing the disease.
- 3) Continue with regular meetings of the group and exchanges with the RAG.
- 4) Identify funding sources for the continuity of the group, training, treatment, and involvement of tour operators.
- 5) Confirm the RAG.
- 6) Hold a project closing meeting to share results and lessons learned, and link the strategies with other regional initiatives and projects.

¹ Maze coral (*Meandrina meandrites*), pillar coral (*Dendrogyra cylindrus*), smooth flower coral (*Eusmilia fastigiata*), and elliptical star coral (*Dichocoenia stokesii*) are especially susceptible and are the first affected species during the outbreak.

² Due to COVID 19 the meetings were held virtually.

2. Dissemination of the regional importance for the attention of SCTLD through an Emergency Declaration Agreement of the Council of Ministers of Environment of the CCAD.

In July 2021, thanks to the coordination of the RDG, the Council of Ministers of Environment of the CCAD approved the Emergency Declaration Agreement for SCTLD in the MAR region as a high-level political and strategic action to promote coordination lines between countries and key partners. Through this agreement, the countries and the RDG were able to implement comprehensive solutions to combat SCTLD, including planning, research, exchange of experiences and knowledge, and the identification and formalization of technical and financial resources.

3. Development and harmonized updating of national action plans for the attention of SCTLD in the MAR.

- ▶ **Mexico:** With the support of and in coordination with the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (CONANP, for its initials in Spanish), the National Action Plan was implemented through a theoretical and practical course in order to train volunteers and students in the rescue, treatment, and restoration of coral species affected by SCTLD. This course was held in the Cozumel Reef National Park (PNAC, for its initials in Spanish), with the participation of 10 people representing academia and local organizations in Quintana Roo. These types of activities can be replicated in other MAR countries to strengthen capacities in SCTLD treatment techniques.
- ▶ **Belize:** In close collaboration with the Fisheries Department and with the objective of increasing awareness and information for the attention of SCTLD in Belize's coastal communities, 12 information sessions were held. The sessions served as a space to raise awareness of SCTLD among tourism service providers and to increase community participation in monitoring the disease, thus promoting best practices to prevent its spread. The sessions were

held in Caye Caulker, San Pedro, Belize City, Dangriga, Placencia, Hopkins, and Punta Gorda, with a total of 177 attendees from the seven (7) communities that have been affected by SCTLD.

- ▶ **Guatemala:** The Action Plan for the Detection, Attention, and Monitoring of SCTLD in the Guatemalan Caribbean was developed through a highly participatory process. The process involved the participation of more than 30 key stakeholders,³ representatives from the government, academia, NGOs, the private sector, and civil society, thus generating a practical, inclusive, coherent plan validated by experts. The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARN, for its initials in Spanish), as the representative authority of the RDG and through the Department of Ecosystems, actively participated in the process by coordinating and arranging meetings, providing information, reviewing, and validating the final document. MARN will coordinate the formalization of this instrument for its application.
- ▶ **Honduras:** The action plan for SCTLD was developed with the support of the National Institute for Forest Conservation and Development, Protected Areas and Wildlife (ICF, for its initials in Spanish) and the General Directorate of Biodiversity (DiBio), with funding from the Swiss Cooperation and MAR Fund. The instrument has been validated with local and national authorities and key stakeholders through two participatory workshops held in Tela and Tegucigalpa. The workshops were financed by the MAR2R Project, while the Secretariat of Energy, Natural Resources, Environment, and Mines of the Republic of Honduras (SERNA, for its initials in Spanish), DiBio, and ICF are coordinating the validation of the plan for its review and subsequent formalization.



³ National stakeholders: Pana Divers, PAHAME; independent consultants: Alejandro Arrivillaga, Carlos Tejada; Consultant from IUCN; School of Biology, MUSHNAT – USAC; CEMA-USAC; IARNA-URL; IICI-CUNIZAB; Semillas del Océano; FUNDAECO; ICIAAD; ABIMA; ADA2; ICC; EcoLogic Development Fund; RRA-SAM; UT RVSPM-CONAP; INGUAT Izabal; DIPESCA; MARN; MAR2R Project; WWF; and MAR Fund
International stakeholders: Nova Southeastern University; Florida Sea Grant; HRI Mexico, Elisa López; CONANP; MPA Connect; and AGRRA.



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4. Standardization of SCTLD monitoring in the region and training of key stakeholders in its application, and the entry of collected data in the Atlantic and Gulf Rapid Reef Assessment (AGRRA) interface.

With the goal of building capacity and creating instruments for the detection, attention, and monitoring of SCTLD, two regional virtual training sessions were held. The workshops served as a space for the exchange of experiences. In addition, the identification of the disease, collaborative regional monitoring, and updates on the status and trends of SCTLD in the four countries were addressed while identifying priorities for action. Workshops were carried out with support from the Atlantic and Gulf Rapid Reef Assessment (AGRRA) and the Healthy Reefs Initiative (HRI). More than 180 people were trained in the workshops, including scientists, marine park co-managers, government agencies, and international NGO members.

As a result of the workshops, a practical guide was developed, which includes recommendations and monitoring methodologies for the different stages of the disease. This instrument also provides elements for the planning and implementation of actions for the attention of SCTLD. The guide will be shared on the Restoration Network portal www.coralmar.org and on the MAR Fund, CCAD, MAR2R Project, AGRRA, HRI, MPACConnect, and other websites, where it is possible to publish the document.

In addition, the capacity building continued in Honduras through a workshop on SCTLD monitoring and coral species identification provided by Bay Islands Conservation Association (BICA)-Utila. During the monitoring, 9 people from the Utila diving community were trained, as well as two members of BICA-Guanaja, in order to provide them with the tools to initiate SCTLD monitoring on the island of Guanaja.

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ The governance of a coordination group has proven useful in making decisions based on reliable data and information with regional impact.
- ▶ Having a platform of experts from different specialties is of great importance to produce quality information and products such as national plans, which become policy, strategy, or planning instruments.
- ▶ The regional coordination of stakeholders to address problems such as SCTLD makes it possible to avoid duplicating efforts, share knowledge, experiences, and treatments, as well as to optimize financial resources, and coordinate institutional efforts.
- ▶ The attention and monitoring of the SCTLD should include the private sector because it also benefits from the environmental services provided by the reef. The problem of colonies infected by the SCTLD should be addressed in a comprehensive manner, with a ridge-to-reef approach and addressing wastewater contamination.

IMPACT

- ▶ The RDG and RAG gave credibility to the project to ensure that national action plans were conducted under scientific guidelines and backed by knowledge from experts with different specialties.
- ▶ The Regional Demonstration Project for Action Planning against SCTLD provided an opportunity to highlight the importance of marine spatial planning, coral reef restoration, and the potential collaboration in the region.
- ▶ The emergency declaration of the Council of Ministers of Environment of the CCAD on the regional importance of SCTLD and the response of the countries to produce dialogues and knowledge exchange in such a short time, shows the importance of having a rapid and specific response from the group of scientists that helped find evidence to justify the regional and national emergency.
- ▶ The countries of the MAR region have strategic instruments and a governance platform for better management of marine resources in the MAR, mainly to address the SCTLD.