



Red Sea conservation

environmental activism on the move

By **Francoise Ohayon**

PHOTO COURTESY OF **Jane Rankin of HEPCA**

Attracted by sandy beaches, outstanding watersports opportunities, and pulsating nightlife, tourists from Egypt and beyond flock in droves to the Red Sea. We all rejoice in seeing the industry flourishing, yet prosperity comes hand in hand with certain risks that must be carefully managed – or else, like the proverbial hen who laid golden eggs, the Red Sea could fall victim to its success. While concern for the environmental impact of mass tourism is nothing new, the means deployed to counter them are making headway.

At the forefront of the movement is the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA), a non-governmental organization that has been working in the fields of marine and land conservation since 1992. Its founders, all members of the diving community, had a vested interest in the sustainability of the Red Sea environment and recognized early on that “with success comes responsibility”. Indeed, beyond the noble mission of being good stewards to the environment, it is the livelihood of the many people depending on the tourism industry that was – and still is – at stake.

Happy tourists are soaking up the sun, so what's the problem?

The ever-increasing number of divers, snor-

kelers and other watersports consumers coming to the Red Sea, is stretching the limits of the ecosystem's self-regulation capacities. Both a consequence of and a drive to the tourist influx, the hotel and real estate construction markets are booming. New resorts mushrooming faster than ever along the coast are as many encroaches on the local fauna and flora's habitat, not to mention the disturbance created by the construction activities themselves. The multiplication of all those risk factors pose a real threat to the coastal environment. Reducing the pressure imposed on this fragile ecosystem, while making the most of this superb economic opportunity is the challenge that HEPCA has taken on.

In the early days, the organization was primarily concerned with the problem posed by boats anchoring on coral reefs. Heavy anchors and chains dropped on, dragged across, or pulling at fragile corals reefs, can easily annihilate years of growth within minutes. Carefully installed mooring buoys provide a much more eco-friendly alternative, as they stay in place and are made available on a first-come, first-serve basis to an infinite number of boats. Initially, a mooring system consisting of 100 buoys was financed by private and public investment. Since then, the project has evolved into the largest mooring system in the world with over 1,200 moorings installed and maintained throughout Hurghada, Safaga and the South Red Sea. This figure is set

to double by year end thanks to ongoing efforts to provide better mooring opportunities in an increasing number of locations. Furthermore, seeing that HEPCA has become a regional expert on the topic, technology transfer is a promising venue to spread best practices beyond Egypt's borders; a pilot project was launched earlier this year in Saudi Arabia.

Taking action

Over the years, HEPCA's activities have gained in scope and stretched out onto dry land. The renovation of underprivileged schools as part of the “Madrasty” project is part of a vision that favors quality education and tries to bridge the gap between socio-economic classes. Initiatives to promote sustainable activities for local Bedouin tribes have facilitated the implementation of self sufficient structures such as the handicrafts centers of Shalatein and Hamata. The development of a solid waste collection and recycling plant in Marsa Alam has provided employment opportunities and generated income through the resale of recyclable materials. Training programs carried out for more than 800 boat skippers and hundreds of additional boat crew members throughout the Red Sea over the years have contributed to the spread of eco-friendly practices.

The underwater and beach cleanup actions organized on Earth Day saw the participation

Garbage collection



Thislegorm wreck conservation



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of professional and recreational divers, tourists, schools as well as local and foreign residents, who all donated their time and spared no effort to return the seashore to its natural beauty. The conservation of shipwrecks, like that of the famous WWII vessels Thistlegorm and Rosalie Moller, not only preserved artifacts of historic significance, but also protected highly valuable tourist attractions. Finally, HEPCA’s campaigns against over fishing and to stop oil drilling in the Red Sea, as well as their lobbying for the legislation to better protect the environment, have received international attention. Under their influence, more than 32 laws, articles and decrees have been changed over the last five years. In the field, the association works closely with governmental agencies and local authorities to ensure that existing laws protecting offshore islands and reefs are enforced.

HEPCA has gained support by staying strongly focused on the interests of all stakeholders. This approach has allowed them to implement changes even when, at first glance, the proposition was none too pleasing. This was the case for instance when the sheer number of tourists visiting a given site became overwhelming and disruptive to the wildlife. Understandably, everybody wants a piece of the action when spectacular sea creatures are concerned, but sometimes limiting the number of divers and snorkelers allowed to visit certain sites is a necessity. This is the case in Abu Dabab Bay, where the habitat of the endangered Dugong is protected, as well as in Samadai, famous for its “Dolphin House” reef. The number of boat users is now kept in check and the same visitors often participate in conservation efforts by reporting sightings.

Hayah – the project

In a latest development, HEPCA has launched Hayah (meaning “Life” in Arabic), the most ambitious environmental project it has undertaken to date. The official launch took place on April 22nd, 2008, on the occasion of Earth Day. Yet far from a one-off one-day event, Hayah is to be deployed over months and possibly years to come. The objective is to raise environmental awareness of various stakeholders in the Red Sea area in the form of a community project. “More and more, the community at large is starting to recognize that each of us has a critical part to play in protecting our environment,” explains spokesperson Jane Rankin. “But so many people are lacking the direction to put this passion into practice, and also the belief and confidence that whatever they do will make a difference.”

With the Hayah project, HEPCA aims to empower individuals and organizations to take practical steps that will result in tangible benefits for the environment, as well as real benefits for all those living, working and visiting the Red Sea. “It’s the idea of responsibility that’s so important,” says Rankin. “It’s too easy to sit back and wait for change, or wait for someone else to do something. By harnessing individual and collective responsibility, this project encourages us all to take a sense of ownership over the Red Sea and our environment.” At the core of Hayah is this concept of environmental citizenship, which is pushed forward both as an attitude model and a plan for action. “Every one of us can make a positive difference!” she insists.

HEPCA believes in the power of education first and foremost and will use a targeted approach to sensitize each group about its individual and collective responsibility in regards to the environment. Concerned parties include diving and watersports operators, hotels, schools, tour operators and travel agents, service providers, as well as tourists and local communities. Yet their approach is not that of a know-it-all colonizing type who pretends to educate the ignorant masses, far from it. The people at HEPCA see themselves as facilitators, empowering communities to find out what’s best for them and how their own objectives can be attained. “We are currently having consultative meetings with safari operators to discuss the way forward,” says Rankin to illustrate the collaborative spirit that characterizes the interaction between the association and the local stakeholders.

Step by step

As part of the program launch, a fact sheet about reefs was distributed for dive guides to use during their briefings. For instance, did you know that coral reefs are the largest living structure on the planet and the only

Earth Day



one that can be seen from space? Most reefs are between 5,000 and 10,000 years old and it can take a year for corals to grow as little as one centimeter. Yet reefs represent less than 1% of the ocean, 25% of them are already dead, and if nothing is done about it now all the world's reefs will be gone within the next 40 years. The marine environment is prolific with 80% of all living organisms found under the oceans' surface. Home to over a million of diverse aquatic species, it is the biggest source of protein in the world and contains elements believed to hold the potential to treat many of the world's most prevalent diseases. Sharing this kind of knowledge during a briefing carries the intention of adding some perspective to the diving or snorkeling experience.

Another phase of the project is the organization of focus groups with different categories of stakeholders, with the aim of putting together best practice manuals. A first draft containing initial guidelines directed at dive operators was distributed on Earth Day. It gives sound, practical advice to hire qualified staff and provide them with adequate knowledge and training, report the state of mooring installations, reefs, pollution, or any violation they may witness to the concerned authorities, and urge staff to regularly pick up any rubbish they find on land or in the water. Other guest-related recommendations are to avoid making a quick buck by giving cheap and easy "intro dives" in lieu of proper training, to enforce a strict "no touch policy." The paper concludes: "By following these simple guidelines you will not only be protecting the Red Sea environment and creating more sustainable conditions in which to work, but you will also gain the respect of your peers and clients and will be highly regarded within the marine business community."

Mohammed Adel, operations manager at the Dive Tribe, found that those guidelines were well received by both dive guides and boat crews because their purpose is easily understandable. "If we want to stay in business, we must protect our assets," he says, adding "a lot of us would be out of work if the Red Sea was no longer attractive for tourists." The business-savvy dive operator went on to explain that profitability does not have to come at a cost to the environment, on the contrary. "If you sell cheap dives, you can't pay fair wages to your staff, and that's when they will be tempted to seek extra tips from uninformed guests, for instance by letting them pick up coral or touch turtles."

Stronger together

The value of an association like HEPCA in centralizing issues and organizing actions is well recognized amongst stakeholders. "For instance, when an oil company started prospecting within the boundaries of a marine national park, all the diving centers stood behind HEPCA and the project was stopped," relates Adel. "They have our full backup whenever they need to exercise influence." The relationship between the association and the industry is based on ongoing exchange and mutual aid. "We report broken mooring lines so that our captains can have easy access to dive sites, but we also supply boats and staff to install moorings on request." Launching environmental projects, however, is not enough – following up on them over time is essential: "Long-term supervision is an absolute necessity; more important than passing laws is enforcing them!" he concludes.

With the support of the public sector, corporate sponsors, private investors, other NGOs, partners and members, HEPCA spreads the message that we all have a duty of care when it comes to the environment. Failing to pay heed will result in much worse than a bad conscience; it will hit where it hurts most: in our wallet! Billions of dollars and millions of jobs around the world are at stake. Therefore, honoring and protecting the sea serves not only nature but mankind as well. ■

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