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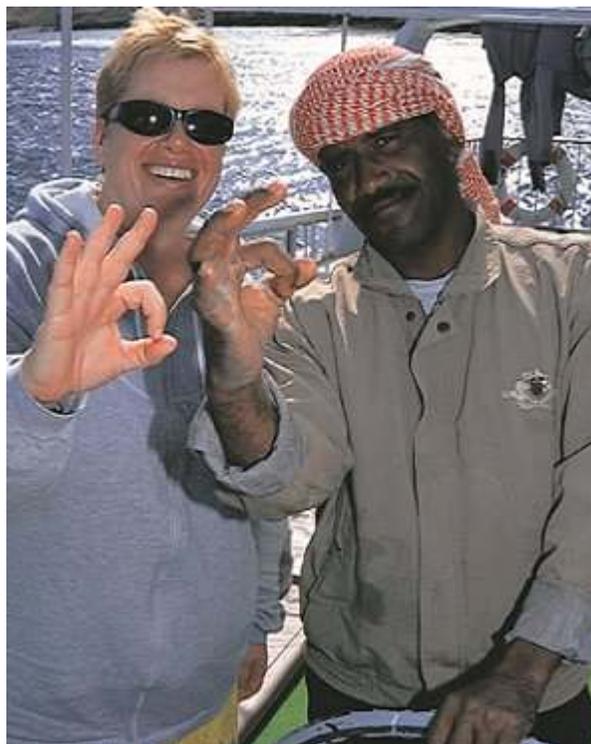
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Welcome to Hurgada (if you're careful)

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An over-dived area of the Egyptian Red Sea is now being protected on two fronts. A voluntary agency installs buoys to save reefs from boat mooring damage, while government rangers enforce a new law to preserve the country's underwater heritage. **Stephen Lee** reports from Hurgada



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I WAS horrified when I first came to Hurgada, says Jane Ossman. She is Training Manager for HEPCA (Hurgada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association), and when she arrived from Ras Mohammed National Park as a PADI instructor with 1000 dives to her name, she was struck by how much the rapid growth of tourism in Hurgada had compromised reef awareness. Unfortunately, hers was a typical reaction. Between 1985 and 1995, many European and Egyptian dive operators capitalised on the Hurgada tourist boom, causing widespread destruction to fringe and other reefs. In peak season the Hurgada reefs might host an average of more than 5000 dives a day, with perhaps 10,000 diver-reef contacts and 500-1000 daily anchorings, each one potentially destroying 50 years of coral growth.



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HEPCA was formed by local dive operators in 1992, and has had a chequered history, mainly due to lack of funding, lack of local support, lack of legal force and, for a time, lack of technical expertise for its main activity - the placing and maintenance of buoys to obviate anchoring on the reefs.

In 1996, US Aid funding enabled 250 new mooring buoys to be placed on 40 dive sites, and this more or less put a stop to mooring on reefs. This initial installation was described in "Hello Buoys" (Diver, April 1997); recently I returned to see if the initiative had worked.

I found that the increasingly visible work of this non-governmental organisation has now been complemented by an operation with teeth, in the shape of Law 102 of the Elba Protectorate. Enforced by four rangers working for the EEAA (Egyptian Environmental Affairs Authority) this law forbids damage to the reef. Offenders expect stern treatment.

Ahmed Rahman, a dive-boat skipper since 1985, always used to anchor on the coral. If he anchored there today, he knows that he could be fined up to £10,000 Egyptian (£2000 Sterling) or even face imprisonment.

Ayman Afifi is the leader of the EEAA rangers trained to enforce reef protection in Hurghada under the new law. It is Ayman who will assess any area of reef damage (charged to offenders at US\$120 per square metre), who will respond rapidly in the ranger boat to alleged infringements, who will warn or prosecute boat captains and who will eventually specify the number of boats allowed on each dive site.

"Without the HEPCA buoys we could not enforce the law," he says. The rangers have the same aims as HEPCA and prosecuted more than 30 boats last year, mainly for anchoring offences.

They are also reporting on coral selling which, Ayman believes, will soon be outlawed in Egypt, and are monitoring the operators of the two tourist submarines for potential reef infringements.

Jane Ossman has various ideas for dealing with Hurghada's problems. She suggests that gloves should be outlawed there, and complains that some dive boats carry as many as 30 divers. A typical dive boat, she says, should have three or four crew and a maximum of 18 divers.

"Controlling buoyancy is essential, but of the 80 licensed operators in Hurghada there are perhaps only five who would sack a clumsy diver who repeatedly damaged coral. The rest, driven mainly by economics, would overlook reef abuse."

A local diving consultant maintains, by contrast, that: "Too much fuss is made about divers wrecking the reef. Earthquakes do by far the most damage."

Jane disagrees: "Many locals understand that no reef equals no tourists."

These conflicting views show the confusion inside

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and outside Hurghada about exactly what HEPCA does and what the conservation problems are. Jane Ossman's tasks are to train boat captains in the proper use of buoys (269 trained so far); to train dive guides to put conservation first; to educate tourists (80 per cent of visitors to Hurghada are not divers), and to educate local schoolchildren, many of whom will later work in tourism.

She says: "The Luxor massacre has made recruiting HEPCA members harder than ever, but new members help to preserve the reef and the diving business for the future, creating a conservation forum in an otherwise fragmented Hurghada. The annual fee, about 400 sterling, is a tiny price to pay, but only members who protect the reef are welcome."

Although conservation is not just a diving industry problem, the HEPCA membership (now totalling 61 organisations) serves as a focus for the area, particularly when high-profile, non-diving members such as Robert Zogbi, manager of the Intercontinental Hotel, are recruited. He says the Intercontinental has a commitment to the environment, and sees the reef as a positive marketing image.

"We will put a reef education video on our in-house channels and provide a weekly room for tourist education. We can commit to eradicating the sale of coral and shells in hotel shops and will add our voice to those trying to convince the Red Sea Governor not to license operators unless they take environmental training."

Neil Plowman (ex-dive centre, now working for Scubaway) believes in the organisation. "I originally felt HEPCA was a dog without teeth, but now it has the ear of the government. Dive centres are listening, and HEPCA can build on increased confidence."

Karim Helal of Diver's Lodge left HEPCA two years ago feeling it was achieving little, but has now rejoined. "We can now take HEPCA seriously," he says. "Although we welcome foreign expertise and need controls, boat captains are dubious about foreigners telling them what to do. I am pleased that the Governor of the Red Sea, a diver himself, is pressing for comprehensive licensing. All of this will help the steady return of tourists to Egypt."

But not everyone is optimistic about the reefs' future. "I was here two years ago," says Dutch diver Lundert Verbiest. "Boats used to moor on the reefs, and they had to break chunks of coral when they got stuck fast. What is gone is gone, and all that the buoying can do is stop further damage." She does agree, however, that diver education can help. Heinrich Schmidt, a German diver, believes that no more sites should be developed in the area because, he says, "Many divers are vandals - today a diver got his depth gauge stuck twice in coral, pulling a large chunk off, and others were disturbing

fish."

I spent a day with HEPCA's technical divers, who install and maintain the buoys. At Erg Adel we dived and found that the "manta" mooring system needed re-drilling into the sand. The team's enthusiasm, strength and competence was impressive.

Its head, Mohamed El Desoky, clearly takes pride in his work. He is aware that coral is worth more alive in the water than dead in a gift shop, and that boat captains need training to use the buoys properly. Nigel Jarvis of Easy Divers believes that: "In real terms, HEPCA has achieved an awareness and a caring for the reef. Now even the worst dive centre would be embarrassed to get caught anchoring on it, although the downside is that anchoring does concentrate diving activity."

The Marine Conservation Society confirmed in 1997 a "consistent improvement in reef health, with increased diver sightings of larger pelagics". Nigel feels that not every change in coral health can be explained, that fluctuations may be partly natural, but that divers can make a difference by supporting dive centres that care. "Look for the HEPCA sign, not just the sign," he says.

Funding in 1998 will allow for seven full-time HEPCA office staff and five technical divers dedicated to the positioning and maintenance of buoys. As part of this year's activities, a new operation - the HEPCA Southern Area Mooring Buoy Installation Project - has recently been launched to install 250 new buoys in the Safaga, El Quisier and Marsa Alam areas. HEPCA could become a catalyst for Egyptian conservation and an example to other reef areas where conservation follows the tourism boom rather than preceding it.

"For now," says Jane Ossman, "I am delighted that we have the finance, the staff and equipment to install and maintain more buoys and that membership is increasing. And because of the EEAA rangers, reef protection is working." n

• *Stephen Lee's travel was arranged by Scubaway (07000 790188). In Hurgada, he was a guest of the Intercontinental, the Hilton and the Marriott Hotels.*

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