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TURKS & CAICOS REEF FUND AWARDED A GRANT TO STUDY EAST CAICOS CORAL REEFS.

15 February 2017, Providenciales, TCI – The Turks & Caicos Reef Fund (TCRF), the only active environmental non-governmental organization in the Turks & Caicos Islands, has been awarded a €50,000 grant to study the coral reefs off the coast of East Caicos. The grant, titled “Understanding East Caicos KBA’s Corals and Coasts: A Key to Safeguarding TCI’s Future,” was awarded by the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) BEST 2.0 Programme (**B**iodiversity and **E**cosystem **S**ervices in Overseas Countries and **T**erritories). Funding for the programme comes from the European Union.

“We are very pleased to be the recipient of this grant,” said Don Stark, Chairman of TCRF. “This is the second grant from the BEST 2.0 Programme we are involved in and appreciate the support of the IUCN and the EU Government.”

The project will be spearheaded by Don Stark of TCRF, in association with Kathleen McNary Wood of SWA Environmental and Marsha Pardee of MerAngel Ecological Services.

“The nearshore waters off the coast of East Caicos contain some of the best remaining unspoiled coral reef ecosystems in the Caribbean region,” said Ms. Wood, who also functions as the volunteer Research Director for the TCRF. “With the exception of only a small portion of marine habitat contained within the RAMSAR Nature Reserve, none of the coral reefs surrounding East Caicos have any conservation status, management plan or monitoring plan. East Caicos’ remoteness, the island’s uninhabited status and its limited use have historically protected the island’s marine resources from significant degradation; however,

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existing development schemes and increasing resource pressures are altering this status quo. Without adequate conservation, management and monitoring protocols in place, East Caicos' fragile resources are at risk from uncontrolled land-based development, inappropriate and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing pressure and other unregulated and unsustainable pressures, increasing the island's coral reefs' vulnerability to global climate change and associated impacts."

The project aims to address the current limitations of management and monitoring policy and improve long-term conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem services within East Caicos' coral reef ecosystems through the development of conservation zones and management and monitoring protocols. The selection of conservation zone classifications will be based on multi-criteria evaluation, which incorporates 16 ecosystem service and biodiversity values and quantitative and qualitative assessment based on Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network (GCRMN) Caribbean methods. Conservation zone classifications and management and monitoring protocols will be agreed via workshops with the TCI management authority (DECR) and local stakeholders. After project completion, TCRF, in conjunction with DECR, will establish regular monitoring protocols at two-year intervals. The project methods and results will be shared via multi-media and open-access online media.

"This is a very important project which help DECR identify new conservation zones around East Caicos based on stakeholder input, create management and monitoring protocols for this important cultural and environmental asset of the TCI, and provide for the ongoing management and monitoring of the gorgeous and unspoiled coral reefs off East Caicos," said Mr. Stark. "We look forward to working closely with DECR staff to implement this project over the course of 2017."

"East Caicos is one of the largest remaining, uninhabited islands left in the Caribbean and tropical Atlantic regions," said Ms. Wood. "It has some of the most pristine stands of critically endangered staghorn (*Acropora cervicornis*) and elkhorn (*Acropora palmate*) corals seen anywhere around the TCI, and we have only started to study the all the reefs around East Caicos."

Mr. Stark encourages everyone to become a member of the TCRF to help preserve and protect the environment of the TCI. You can become a member by going to their website – www.tcreef.org/donate.html - or by contacting Mr. Stark by phone (347-8455) or email (donstark@tcreef.org).

About TCRF

Founded in 2010, the Turks & Caicos Reef Fund is the only active environmental advocacy organization in the TCI. It is an all volunteer-run organization that provides funding for education, research and conservation programs to

individuals, organizations and agencies that help to preserve and protect the environment of the Turks & Caicos Islands. Our goal is to have at least 85% of all funds raised through voluntary contributions from divers and snorkelers visiting the Turks & Caicos Islands directed to the Fund's programs.

Anyone wishing to donate or assist the TCRF in any way can contact them through their website, www.TCReef.org. Scuba divers visiting the islands are encouraged to make a \$10 donation through the purchase of a dive tag that can be attached to their dive gear to show their support. Snorkelers visiting the islands can show their support through the \$5 purchase of a pink or blue silicone wristband. A complete list of outlets for TCRF merchandise can be found on the organization's website.

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