



“Save St. Maarten’s Coral Reefs Project”



Funded by the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Gebied



Project Information

The main goal of the Save St. Maarten's Coral Reef Project (SSC) was to increase awareness and knowledge about the importance of coral reefs and to urge the youth to increase protection of this significant ecosystem to secure their existence in the future. As part of the SSC project several activities were conducted on St. Maarten related to coral reef conservation, outreach and education. Coral reef education and awareness were conducted on the island focusing mainly on school students and the youth, but did not exclude other residents of St Maarten. The general community, focusing on residents, were engaged in coral reef importance and the need of protection by, news articles, social media and events involving adults and their children throughout the year. School visit programs, Coral Scuba Diver Program and a Coral Snorkel Event were conducted for the youth of the island.

Interactive presentations were given to students at their schools. Topics such as coral reef biology, threats to corals, the need to protect coral reefs and the wastewater problems affecting corals were all addressed. These presentations took place both with in person visits and virtual visits throughout the year to accommodate hybrid and home learning. Several classes were visited and student groups such as the Youth Brigade and Community Service groups also took part in presentations.

Other events included were the Coral Snorkel Trips and the Coral Scuba Diver Program. These events were very important to the project, as they were an opportunity for the local students of St. Maarten to view corals firsthand. For many students this was be the first time they are given the chance to see a natural marine environment and viewing the corals will show them the beauty and importance of these ecosystems, as well as show them the damage that has been done to the local reefs. Witnessing the corals firsthand gave the students a sense of pride and responsibility to become coral advocates.

The SSC project strengthened public support for corals and reef conservation, especially by the students of St. Maarten, as the youth is our future.

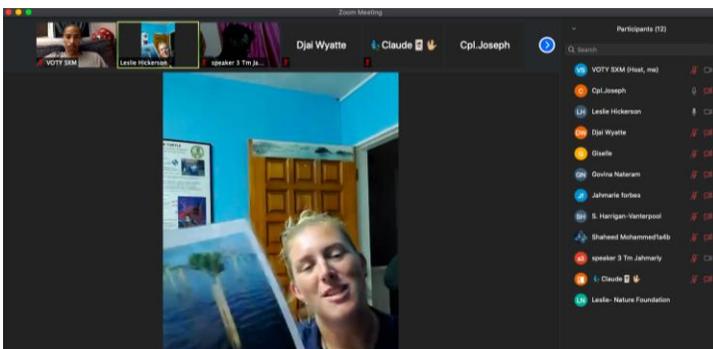
Events and Equipment Funded by Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Gebied

School Presentations

Throughout the year the Nature Foundation staff gave interactive presentations to over 600 students on St. Maarten about the basics of coral education, the health of St. Maarten's Coral Reefs, and what can be done to help protect them. Students took part in these presentations both in person and virtually. With the use of the new Thinkpad laptop provided by the generous support of the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Gebied students were able to properly see and interact with the Nature Foundation staff for these presentations during lockdowns and stay-home orders. Until this point the equipment at the Nature Foundation office did not have a web camera to be able to give virtual presentations. Especially in 2020 this became an essential item for us to be able to continue with educational and awareness programs that help inspire younger generations to take in interest in their natural environment.

For many students this was the first time they were introduced to the topic of coral reefs. The staff were able to use many materials to help the students learn in an interactive manner including a 3D Model of a Coral Polyp, posters, presentation materials, coral samples, and images.

These presentations had very high return with several students participating in volunteer and other community activities after taking part in the presentation. Students took a simple survey at the end of each presentation and over 90% responded that they had learned something new about corals or the island's coral reefs.



Coral Scuba Diver Course

Funding from the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Gebied gave four local students ages 12-14 the opportunity to participate in the Coral Scuba Diver Course. The students that were accepted attend four different local schools on the island of St. Maarten. The course took place over several weeks during which students learned the basics of scuba diving, how to be an eco-friendly diver, the basics of coral education, the threats facing St. Maarten's coral reefs, and what is being done to help protect them, as well as necessary advanced diving skills.

Throughout several classroom and pools sessions and four open water dives these students received their PADI Junior Open Water Diver Certification and their Nature Foundation Coral Scuba Diver Awareness Certificate. This is an invaluable experience for the students who have now been able to see our underwater ecosystem firsthand at an early and impressionable age. Exposing these students to the beauty of our coral reefs will instill a sense of responsibility to protect and preserve this natural resource and encourage them to be conservation ambassadors within their communities.



In addition to receiving this amazing lifetime certification these four students were able to purchase basic scuba gear including masks, snorkels, and fins. Being able to learn to dive in gear that fit them properly made an exceptional difference for these students and they were able to choose gear that they can use for future dive or snorkel experiences, many of whom would not have been able to afford to do so. Personal gear including masks also enhanced safety protocol during these courses. Many of these students would not have been able to invest the necessary funds to purchase their own equipment.



Coral Education Snorkels

Three separate coral education snorkels were held with 20 students invited to participate in each event giving 60 local students the opportunity to snorkel and view corals firsthand. The foundation focused on providing this opportunity to under privileged students or low income families. During these 4 hour trips the students took part in two interactive presentations about corals. In the first presentation students learned and discussed the basics of coral anatomy, what makes them unique and delicate animals, what conditions they need to thrive, and the special ecosystem services coral reefs provide for humans.

After their introduction to corals the students entered the water to snorkel with members of Nature Foundation staff who helped the students discover and learn the differences between coral species, an introduction to marine life, and how to be conscientious when taking part in watersports activities.

Before visiting a second snorkel location students took part in a second discussion about St. Maarten's coral reefs and the threats they are facing. At the end of the presentation the groups talked about what is being done to help save our coral reefs and how the students could do their part to contribute to the health of St. Maarten's coral reefs.

These trips were very well received and all of the students that participated surveyed that they had seen or learned something new during these events. Many students that participated in the Coral Education Snorkels later participated in other outreach events with the Foundation.



Project Conclusion

The save St. Maarten's Coral Reefs Project provided many students their first opportunity to learn about the coral reefs surrounding their island and even view them for the first time. Inspiring younger generations to value and protect their natural resources is an essential part of conservation. These students will, one day, be in a position of leadership. If from a young age they can learn that these ecosystems are essential and must be protected they are more likely to value them as adults.

Through presentations, courses, snorkeling trips, and diving certifications the Nature Foundation introduced several hundred St. Maarten students to coral reef education. By a great measure of success many of these students learned and retained information about corals and were very involved in discussion about what threatens them most and how we can protect them.

The main goal of the Save St. Maarten's Coral Reef Project (SSC) was to increase awareness and knowledge about the importance of coral reefs and to urge the youth to increase protection of this significant ecosystem to secure their existence in the future. With the support of the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds Caribisch Gebied the Nature Foundation was able to succeed in this goal. Projects like SSC are very important for the future of our island and should be a focus for our communities.