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Tioman's Renggis reef is facing a bleak future amidst the growing urbanisation of the island. A constant awareness of the reef's benefits and a respect for nature itself might be their only hope.

By Orla Doherty, Managing Director PCRF

Reefs At Risk

Reef Scene

After months of sailing and exploring Indonesia, we arrived in Tioman, Malaysia. The island has been a significant point on our route over the years. We completed three studies in 2001, 2006 and this past July, on the reef around Renggis Island, a small rock outcrop on Tioman's southwest side.

The Renggis reef encapsulates many of the challenges faced by reefs around the world. In the 1980s and early 1990s, it was devastated by destructive fishing methods – dynamite and cyanide fishing – which were rife throughout Southeast Asia at the time. In 1994, it was gazetted as part of the Pulau Tioman Marine Park, one of many marine parks established by Malaysia, in a brave effort to preserve their reefs. When we first encountered it in 2001, we could see that the reef benefited from this protection. Black tip reef sharks patrolled the southern reef as a symbol of its ability to revive.

By 2006, the struggle took on a more hopeful direction, with large areas of the reef covered in

fields of healthy corals and a huge diversity of species represented. Like many reefs in Malaysia, the coral predator – Crown of Thorns Seastar – was prevalent but regular cleanups kept it under control. Tell-tale white patches of freshly damaged coral tissue and skeleton showed clearly in the shallows.

However, the more worrying threats to the reef were not happening in the water, but on the nearby shores of Tioman. Development was in full swing, with a new marina under construction, including an inland waterway for small boats, the paving of a road across the island to the more remote Juara village and, most threateningly, the major expansion of a resort opposite the small island.

When we returned this July, we found the reef to have taken a sharp nosedive into decline. Damage from Crown of Thorns appears to be on the rise, indicating that cleanup efforts are not as vigorous as they were. More visitors to the reef are leaving their marks in broken corals which

are immediately infested with algal overgrowth. These intensify with the fertilisers being poured onto the resort's 100-acre golf course opposite it. Moreover currents bring sediment from the construction of beaches, jetties, sea walls and roads at Tekek (the hub on Tioman).

The Marine Park was established with the intention of preserving the waters and reefs within two miles of nine islands, including Tioman and Renggis. Its management authorities are clearly unable to enforce the park rules. At nearby Pulau Tulai, we found fish traps in the bay filled with ornamental butterflyfish and adult groupers. Closer to Renggis, where boat anchoring and jetski running are officially prohibited, we found both happening. Reefballs, cement structures planted to provide substrate for new coral growth, are smothered in sediment before any recruitment of new colonies can take place.

Renggis continues to be a reef worthy of intense efforts towards preservation. It repaid those efforts in 2001 with signs of great recovery from previous harm. A resurgence towards those intentions and striking a healthy balance between Tioman's tourism drive and the continued conservation of Malaysia's reefs, will not only help Renggis as an ecosystem, but also help set standards in managing our remaining coral reefs on this planet.

"Join the Voyage" of the SV Infinity, Raffles Marina's "club at sea" in Nautique and PCRf's homepage at www.pcrf.org. Together on our mission to conserve and protect the coral reefs and oceans, we can make a difference!