

IN32 The biodiversity of coral patch reefs and their conservation value

Dr Gabby Ahmadi, University of Texas A & M

Coral reefs are one of the most biologically diverse and productive marine ecosystems. This is often enhanced by nearby ecosystems including mangroves and seagrasses. Connecting these systems are transition zones often scattered with coral patch reefs also known as coral bommies. A coral bommie is an isolated coral outcrop surrounded entirely by sand or rubble. They are centers of diversity and abundance that act as a refuge for fish and invertebrate communities. Research has commonly described the distinct habitats provided by the main reef crest, near-shore seagrass beds and intervening patch reef (Unsworth et al. 2007). However, there has been little characterisation of the fish and invertebrate assemblages that inhabit the patch reef zone, despite their significant addition to the overall biodiversity of coral reef ecosystems. Hence, there are many potential questions that remain regarding the patch reef zone.

Fish are an integral component of coral reef ecosystems for the movement of energy and materials within the reef and between seagrass systems. They utilize coral patch reefs for both refuge from predators and additional food resources. Some of these fishes are resident fishes, and remain on the patch reef throughout either their entire life span post-settlement, or may use it during a certain life-stage often as nursery habitat. Other fishes are more transient and may make diurnal or tidal migrations from the reef proper into the patch reef zone maximizing their resource use from multiple zones. Patch reefs are also thought to be stepping zones from one ecosystem to another (i.e. seagrass to coral reef). The patch reefs provide additional refuge structure for fishes minimizing their travel through expanses of sand or rubble.

Projects can focus on the ecological drivers effecting the species diversity and abundance on different bommies. A multitude of environmental factors can be considered including lunar cycles, diurnal and tidal cycles. Characteristics of individual coral bommies including size, habitat complexity, benthic composition, and their distance from reef crest can also be incorporated into project design. The idea of a coral bommie as "stepping stones" can be further investigated by examining physical and biological isolation of the coral bommies. If they are indeed being used as stepping zones, then more isolated coral bommies would likely have decreased abundance and diversity.

Conservation implications of this study are multifaceted. Investigations into the ecological contribution of coral bommies to the near shore environment help gain a better understanding of their conservation value. This is particularly important considering that coral reefs are being threatened worldwide due to both natural and anthropogenic disturbances. Coral bommies may be particularly susceptible to global climate change, as the shallower zones that they tend to occupy are in shallower marine habitats subject to greater fluctuations in temperature. Outcomes of this research may also be relevant in construction of artificial structure. Artificial reefs have been proposed to alleviate habitat loss and in creating these structures, developers want to know the optimal size, composition and spatial distribution to enhance diversity and abundance of fish assemblages.

This research requires in water activity and is suitable for those primarily interested in snorkeling based research.

Suggested Reading

Ault T and Johnson C 1998b Spatially and temporally predictable fish communities on coral reefs. *Ecological Monographs* 68(1):25-50

Chabanet P, Ralambondrainy H, Amanieu M, Faure G and Galzin R 1997 Relationships between coral reef substrata and fish. *Coral Reefs* 16:93-102.

Gratwicke B and Speight MR 2005 The relationship between fish species richness, abundance and habitat complexity in a range of shallow tropical marine habitats. *Journal of Fish Biology* 66(3):650-667

Sale PF, Guy JA and Steel WJ 1994 Ecological structure of assemblages of coral reef fishes on isolated patch reefs. *Oecologia* 98:83-99

Sale PF and Steel WJ 1989 Temporal variability in patterns of association among fish species on coral patch reefs. *Marine Ecology Progress Series* 51:35-47.