

Reef Check: involvement of SCUBA diver volunteers in the Coastal Environment Monitoring Protocol for the Mediterranean Sea

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Science has neither the work force nor the financial resources to meet the demands that are being placed upon it. However, much of the research that is needed to fulfil biodiversity action plans is labour intensive but technically straightforward. Volunteer-based monitoring is a potential solution to this problem. The use of macrodescriptors, easily recordable even by non-specialists, allows the involvement of laypeople, in order to add further data to those provided by the scientific community. Volunteers have already made significant contributions to scientific knowledge through their participation in a range of studies. The potential of this workforce is well illustrated in the tropical programme 'Reef Check'. Recreational divers surveyed over 300 reefs in 31 countries in a global survey that was certainly beyond the resources of conventional scientific projects. In northern Europe, NELOS (www.biologie.nelos.be) in Belgium and The Netherlands, and SEASEARCH (www.seasearch.org.uk) in the UK, are well-established projects that have developed observation protocols appropriate for their target areas and objectives. Since 2006, the Mediterranean network, coordinated by Reef Check Italia onlus, involves more than 600 trained recreational divers that conduct around 2.000 surveys. They apply a standardised visual census method concerning up to 39 easily identifiable target species. All the data are stored in an online database (www.reefcheckitalia.it). Citizen science allows all those who are interested in the marine resource to contribute to its understanding. Beyond providing valuable data, the increased awareness that comes from participation in the surveys is vital to the protection of coastal marine resources.