

Involving different stakeholders in marine research: collaborations with the recreational scuba diving industry in Southeast Asia

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Multiple challenges must be overcome to successfully communicate the outcomes of marine science to the general public. For example, it can be hard for a scientist to get in touch with the audience interested in their field of study. In addition, scientists are often focussed on such a narrow field that it might be difficult to relate their findings to other scientists, let alone the lay audience. Our research focuses on shallow water cryptobenthic fishes, species that are mostly unknown to the general public, government policy bodies and even marine scientists. However, they are of interest to recreational scuba divers.

To increase visibility of our research, we used a two-pronged communication strategy. Directly interacting with dive centres, NGOs and the local governments at our study sites allowed us to illustrate the importance of our research to local stakeholders. By using offline and online media such as dive magazines, forums, blogs and social media we involved a larger audience. This not only created greater public awareness, but also had direct research outcomes.

Our research showed that in Indonesia and Philippines, understudied cryptobenthic species generate over US\$150 million per year in tourist income. We developed a new method to identify which species are of the highest interest to the general public. This method can be used by other organisations to decide on communication strategies, thus maximizing their outreach impacts. We reached a large lay audience during more than 50 presentations at dive-centres, inspired local scientists in guest lectures at local universities and NGOs, and influenced policy by presenting research to local governments.

While science communication can be a challenge, direct collaborations with the right stakeholders benefit both those stakeholders and researchers. Working with local dive operators and NGOs allowed us to get in touch with the audience most interested in our research and gave us the benefit of fieldwork at greatly reduced costs. Social media helped us reach the public interested in our research, but that would otherwise have never known about it. Above all, this project showed that successful outreach can be achieved by choosing the right approach.