



**Report of the Marine Clean-up  
at Trincomalee**

**Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> &  
Sunday 15th May 2005**



## **Introduction**

The main coral reefs in the Trincomalee region are situated in Pigeon Islands National Park and Dutch Bay. These were some of the worst affected sites of the December 26 Indian Ocean tsunami which inflicted considerable mechanical damage to many of the coral colonies, either overturning or breaking them. However, in comparison to many of the coastal areas of the south and southwest of Sri Lanka, there was little debris deposition on the reefs in the east. The less developed infrastructure in the east, pre-tsunami, is a possible explanation for the lack of large bits of masonry and other types of debris deposited on the reefs around the south and southwest coasts. However, some fishing nets were found on the reefs around Pigeon Islands.

Since Pigeon Islands is a Marine Protected Area, it was one of the priority sites of the IUCN clean-up programme. However, since the tsunami, Claudio Trento, Managing Director of Diving The Snake based at French Garden on Uppuveli Beach just north of Trincomalee, has cleaned the reefs around Pigeon Island, removing the nets and other small pieces of debris. Consequently, and on advice from Claudio, IUCN focused efforts on another dive site in the area: Swami Rock. This is a rocky headland at the south end of Uppuveli Beach that is favoured by many local fishermen and dive operators alike. It is made up of large boulders on a slope descending to the sandy seabed at a maximum depth of 22m. There is some coral growth, in the form of encrusting and massive coral colonies, and often large numbers of commercially valuable fish and other smaller reef-related fish species. As well as the tsunami waves depositing some debris, years of fishing have taken their toll on this area, with large numbers of fishing nets and lines becoming snagged on the rocks and corals, and consequently endangering the marine life in this area and also creating a considerably less attractive dive site.

An email was sent out to IUCN's network of volunteers informing of the date, planned aims for the weekend and other necessary information. Due to the depth, the clean-up was limited to divers only, and to keep the operation manageable numbers were limited to a maximum of 10 volunteers, plus Claudio and his two Divemasters (see Appendix 1 for a list of participants). A minibus left the IUCN offices for Trincomalee on Friday 13<sup>th</sup> with 3 IUCN staff and 6 other volunteers; another volunteer came independently from Mannar in the north. Accommodation was provided by IUCN in French Garden on Uppuveli Beach. The actual clean-up took place on Saturday and Sunday, with the minibus returning to Colombo on Sunday evening after the debris had been taken to the dumpsite.

Leaflets aimed at coastal inhabitants were designed and printed in Sinhala and Tamil. These were then given to Mr B.L. Sarath Kumara, President of the Weeranagaraya Fisheries Cooperative Society, to distribute among members of the Society. The leaflets explained why cleaning Sri Lanka's beaches and reefs was important, and described the main benefits the locals would experience. A number of these leaflets, as well as lists of government approved local dumpsites, were also given to Mr V.T. Yogarajah, Programme Officer of the UNDP Transition Programme, for distribution amongst government officials, project leaders, NGOs, and community-based organisations.

## The clean-up

Diving equipment was rented from Diving The Snake, and gloves and scissors were provided by IUCN to help cut the fishing net away from delicate areas with corals and other sensitive marine organisms.

Two boats were used to transport the team to Swami Rock and one anchored up whilst the other stayed free to aid with the lifting of the nets. Using snorkels an appropriate, central and easily recognisable base at an approximate depth of 8m was identified. Four pairs of divers descended to the base, where one pair remained whilst the other pairs spread out over the area searching for debris. These divers then carefully removed the nets and lines, swimming along the lengths coiling them in their hands and using scissors to cut away any bits tangled round corals or other marine organisms. This was a delicate operation due to the large numbers of sea urchins present in amongst the debris. Care was taken to damage or disturb them as little as possible.



Once free, the nets were then brought back to the central base where the first pair remained. Two or three volunteers had stayed on the surface snorkeling and acting as intermediaries between the dive operation and the boatmen. Once sufficient net had been accumulated, the free-floating boat dropped its anchor above the stationary divers who then hooked the debris on to the anchor and signaled to the snorkelers who subsequently helped the boatmen to haul it in to the boat. This method worked very well, and it was used on all the dives over the weekend.



Once ashore, all the debris was collected on a big tarpaulin sheet and dragged up the beach to a convenient spot where it was then loaded into a trailer and taken by tractor to Vilkambiwara, a government-recommended dumpsite in Kanniya about 8km from Trincomalee.



### **Observations, recommendations and future clean-ups**

Although much of the debris and nets were removed from Swami Rock over the weekend, some nets still remain. Claudio indicated that some of his diving clients are often keen to contribute towards its environmental upkeep. He intends to collect the last pieces of net on Swami Rock with a team of like-minded divers at some point soon. There is also the hope that many of the dive sites in this area will be kept clean in the future by this kind of voluntary approach.

In addition to the debris in the marine environment at Trincomalee, all the way along Uppuveli Beach large quantities of small pieces of litter have been accumulating mainly due to the eastern monsoon winds driving the town's discarded debris onshore. There are possible plans to return and carry out a beach clean-up here now that the wind has changed direction.

During one of the dives, the rampant dynamite fishing that occurs in this region was audibly experienced underwater. Although far away from our actual dive location, sound travels a long way through water and so the sound of the blast was very noticeable. We were warned of the probability of this happening, but none of the volunteers had experienced it before, and it came as quite a shock to most. On another dive, the destructive impact of dynamite fishing was visibly observed by a number of divers; healthy coral had been blasted into small chunks and



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fragments. Not only is dynamite fishing bad for the dive tourism industry and potentially dangerous for divers, it is incredibly damaging for the marine environment; it causes substantial stress and often mortality to the corals, and unnecessarily kills large numbers of fish many of which are not even collected by the fishermen but are just left on the seabed.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Thanks are due to Claudio Trento and Diving The Snake for the help and advice in planning the diving operation, and for providing good quality dive equipment and boats. To G.I. Raj of the Pragash Guest House and his staff for accommodating our group.

Thanks also should be given to all the volunteers that took part in the clean-up.

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**Photo credits:** Marten Meynell - photos 1, 2, 3, 5  
Jane Higgins - photo 4  
Unknown - photo 6



**Appendix 1: List of participants**

Marten Meynell	IUCN
Kumi Ekaratne	IUCN
Gaya Sriskanthan	IUCN
Ethan Gelber	
Jane Higgins	
Rosie Hogsflesh	
Debbie Donovan	
Diccon Burr	
Arjuna Mendis	
Sarah Holt	
Claudio Trento	Diving The Snake
Michael Möller	Diving The Snake
Sadun	Diving The Snake