

Coral Chronicles Newsletter

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REGIONAL NEWS

Belize's Seaweed Farms: A Win for Reef Health

Seaweed farms in Belize have become a success story for reef resilience—posing a model for other countries in the Caribbean.

The Nature Conservancy's CoralCarib initiative hosted a regional seaweed cultivation training in Belize this January, bringing together practitioners from Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. The training was part of a larger effort to strengthen coral reef ecosystems, reduce pressures on fisheries and support alternative livelihoods for coastal communities in the region.

In hands-on exercises, participants worked alongside Belizean farmers to learn the fundamentals of cultivation, from rope preparation and plot design to harvesting techniques. Farmers shared lessons from managing their operations, including the three-month growth cycle between planting and harvest and the ongoing maintenance required to keep farms productive.

Members of the Jamaican delegation benefited from the example of how seaweed aquaculture can be adapted to diversify income while easing dependence

on fishing. While the transition to aquaculture can be difficult, particularly given the delay between initial investment and first harvest, TNC specialists noted that seaweed farming provides fishers with an oceanic crop as well as allows them to remain closely connected to the ocean, an important factor in the success of alternative livelihood programs.

The training included in-class theoretical sessions led by local experts from TNC Belize, as well as hands-on sessions with the Women's Seaweed Association of Belize.

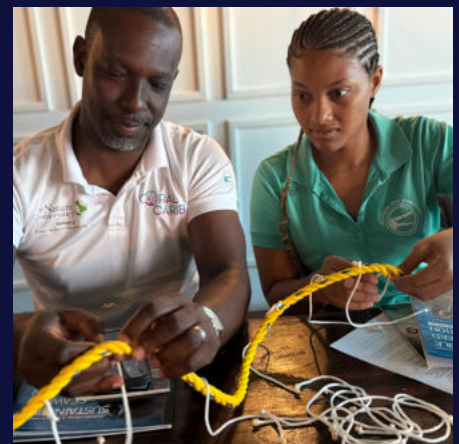
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“Seaweed farming offers an alternative and sustainable livelihood, which is what we are promoting. As we try to reduce the threats to our reef and fisheries, activities like seaweed farming pose an opportunity for fishers to change their livelihoods. We are also promoting other alternatives like pelagic or deep-sea fishing.”

Dr. Dexter Colquhoun
Research Program Manager, Alligator Head Foundation, Jamaica

Above: A seaweed farmer harvests seaweed on her farm in Placencia, Belize. This farm is part of a TNC-sponsored program to bring seaweed aquaculture to the area in cooperation with the Placencia Fishermen Cooperative. © Randy Olson

Below: Participants practice foundational rope preparation techniques to set up seaweed cultivation lines (top). Training participants travel by boat to visit seaweed plots and observe cultivation practices in the field. (bottom). © Michele Lopez/ TNC Belize



Building the Future of Sexual Propagation

In Cuba, coral restoration efforts are expanding beyond nurseries and advancing into reproduction techniques.

TNC staff and the local partner, Acuario Nacional de Cuba, are closely monitoring spawning and sexual propagation of *Diploria labyrinthiformis* and *Acropora cervicornis*, pairing field observation with laboratory work. Last year, 10 colonies of *A. cervicornis* spawned at the Acuario Nacional nursery, achieving 90% fertilization and producing approximately 1,200 recruits, a sign that assisted sexual propagation can be successful.

Last fall brought a massive spawning event of *Orbicella annularis* and *O. faveolata* at El Tanque in Ciénaga de Zapata. Alongside gamete collection, researchers documented the predatory behavior of butterflyfish during spawning events, adding ecological insight into coral vulnerabilities at their most critical life stage.

At the institutional level, the Cuban government continues supporting IKI's CoralCarib coordination. One positive step is a plan for TNC to import specialized equipment to establish a dedicated sexual propagation laboratory in Ciénaga de Zapata. A newly formed national committee will streamline the process. In addition, TNC Cuba hosted the first coral restoration workshop in Zapata for divers to raise awareness and strengthen engagement with CoralCarib's mission.

Two scientific papers on coral restoration are underway, showcasing how Cuban conservation efforts contribute to protecting reefs and advancing global knowledge.

“Working with communities is one of the most important pillars of this project. We are training people, bringing in local help, and strengthening the commitment of those who live near the reef so that these actions will continue over time.”

Ramón Alexis Fernández Osoria
Director, Acuario Nacional de Cuba



Right: Brain coral and diver, Jardines de la Reina, Cuba.
© Ian Shive



📍 DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

New Research Hubs Advance Large-Scale Reef Restoration

FUNDEMAR'S NEW RESEARCH CENTER ALREADY SHOWING PROMISING RESULTS

The opening of FUNDEMAR's Marine Research Center (MARE-DR) in August marks a milestone in the country's efforts to implement large-scale coral restoration, supporting assisted sexual reproduction, monitoring, and innovation. Since the opening, FUNDEMAR has monitored the spawning of six coral species and produced over 270,000 coral recruits settled on 10,900 substrates in the new lab facilities. The recruits were then outplanted on more than 2,000 square meters of reef habitat. This work is already informing best practices for restoration on a regional scale.

INNOVATION IN PUNTA CANA

In Punta Cana, the relocation of the Centro de Innovación Marino (CIM) is nearly complete and poised to support large-scale mariculture and community outreach. The team advanced micro-fragmentation efforts, installed nursery systems, completed multi-site monitoring, and engaged students and youth in hands-on conservation. These efforts help strengthen local capacity for reef resilience.

Over the last year, the Fundación Punta Cana team produced more than 400 microfragments of *Acropora palmata* and *Orbicella annularis*, adding to nearly 2,350 coral fragments propagated in 2025. The more than 76% survival rate showed the promise of this approach. While fragmentation activities remain temporarily paused during the transition to CIM 2.0, the team continues advancing other critical phases of the restoration cycle.

September's spawning nights brought a surge of life. The team successfully fertilized nearly 323,000 *Acropora palmata* and over 24,450 *A. cervicornis* embryos. From these efforts, over 1,400 *A. palmata* and approximately 120 *A. cervicornis* recruits settled onto substrates, tiny settlers that provide a foundation for coral

larvae to grow and build reefs.

Restoration also extended beyond corals. The team collected over 40 urchin recruits from deployed mats and bio-balls, reinforcing the reef's natural algae control system and strengthening ecosystem balance.

CIM also remains a hub for knowledge-sharing. A total of 1,074 visitors engaged in tours and marine life talks, building local awareness and forging community support for reef conservation. Meanwhile, scientific contributions continued: a paper on coral-associated flatworms was submitted to the *Journal of Aquatic Animal Health*, and another on restoration net designs will be part of a special coral restoration issue of the *Revista de Biología Tropical*.

The twin labs in Bayahibe and Punta Cana are living classrooms and production hubs that multiply restoration capacity, create local jobs, and protect fisheries and coastlines. By piloting new tools and testing funding models, the Hub is setting a regional standard for scalable, community-rooted restoration.

The work in the Dominican Republic highlights early successes for restoration efforts focused on growing reefs, knowledge, and community support.

NEW CORAL "ORCHARDS" TAKE ROOT

In the Dominican Republic, our local partner, FUNDEMAR, for the first time began cultivating sexually produced coral recruits to test whether they could establish coral "orchards." The hexagonal structures are designed to stabilize coral reef skeletons and support coral out-planting into grow-out efforts.

The orchards would function as spawning hubs for future collection efforts and promote connectivity between populations. These Reef Stars are carefully designed by MARS.

Above: Outplanted coral thrive on a coral reef in the Dominican Republic. © Fundación Punta Cana

Right: Coral stars—hexagonal hard structures—provide a stable surface for the establishment and growth of coral reefs in the Dominican Republic. © Fundación Punta Cana



Community at the Heart of Reef Recovery

THE INITIATIVE FOR ENVIRONMENT AND INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT IN HAITI

For the first time, voices from all six communes and three departments of the Marine Protected Area (MPA) came together in one room in Haiti.

Held in December, the Reef Resilience Forum marked a milestone for the MPA and CoralCarib's work in Haiti. Designed as the inaugural meeting of what our local partner, the Initiative for Environment and Integrated Development in Haiti (IEDIH), aims to make an annual gathering, the forum created a space where local authorities, fishers, technical institutions, civil society, and national partners could share perspectives, challenges, and align around mutual priorities for coral reef protection and restoration.

A highlight of the forum was a multi-stakeholder panel, which featured local leaders and institutions. By the end of the day, participants came to a consensus on actions to strengthen coordination and governance of the MPA.

HAITI OCEAN PROJECT

The Haiti Ocean Project (HOP) closed 2025 on a high note, achieving milestones that connect regional science to local action. At the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute annual meeting in Cartagena, Colombia, HOP leaders shared how community engagement under CoralCarib led to meaningful conservation outcomes—including the rescue of an adult female hawksbill sea turtle within a refugia site.

In December, surveys off Petit Trou de Nippes confirmed healthy populations of *Orbicella faveolata* and *Orbicella annularis*. The next step is returning to collect fragments for macro-fragmentation and out-planting these resilient colonies to nearby restoration sites. These surveys conducted at the coral nursery and refugia site indicate approximately 15-20% coral cover, accompanied by high densities of *Diadema antillarum* and minimal algal overgrowth. These ecological conditions are promising. HOP's interventions aim to enhance coral resilience and contribute to the restoration of fish and marine megafauna populations impacted by historical coral decline.

Left: A panel of local leaders and institutions discuss coordination and governance of Haiti's Marine Protected Area (MPA) (top). Participants from six communes and three departments of the MPA attend the Reef Resilience Forum held in Haiti (bottom). © Claude Alix

Right: HOP leaders rescue an adult female hawksbill sea turtle within a refugia site in Haiti (top). HOP's junior coordinators demonstrate how to micro-fragment coral (bottom). © The Haiti Ocean Project



Partnership Spotlight

PARTNERS UNITE TO SAFEGUARD HAITI'S LARGEST MARINE ECOSYSTEM

To help conserve Haiti's Baradères-Cayemites Marine Protected Area, the country's largest MPA and a key CoralCarib site, TNC, United Nations Environment Programme, and Canada's Centre d'étude et de Coopération Internationale are collaborating with Haiti's National Protected Areas Agency of the Ministry of Environment to develop a comprehensive management plan. Over the coming months, the plan will be created through a collaborative process involving the Haitian government, partners, and local stakeholders to protect the area's marine and coastal ecosystems and support sustainable livelihoods.

With over 87,600 hectares, the MPA supports coral reefs, seagrass beds, mangroves, offshore waters, and diverse coastal habitats. Implementing formal management will represent a major shift for the Nippes-Grand'Anse region. The international initiative aims to guide the transition from ecological decline and uncertain community conditions to a future characterized by strong environmental stewardship, economic sustainability, and social balance.





📍 JAMAICA

Resilience After the Storm

When Hurricane Melissa struck Jamaica last October, its devastating force reaching wind speeds of up to 185 mph tore through communities and ecosystems alike. Coral nurseries were damaged, recruits were lost, and the project site, already vulnerable, faced extended electricity and internet outages.

However, recovery efforts are setting a new course for the future representing a turning point for the rebuilding of reefs while redesigning the systems that sustain them.

Increased surveillance around the East Portland Fish Sanctuary, paired with training for fisherfolk in Pelagic, Fish Aggregating Devices (FAD) and Safety at Sea instruction is strengthening threat mitigation for our local partners

at Alligator Head Foundation (AHF). New AHF staff have been trained in SCUBA and restoration techniques to increase the team's capacity. Demonstrating nature's resilience, monitoring results confirm continued survival of the first set of sexually reproduced *Orbicella faveolata* and *O. annularis* corals in ex situ systems in Jamaica.

In the wake of prolonged power disruptions, TNC CoralCarib and AHF installed solar panels at the Alligator Head Foundation property. The transition to renewable power will help stabilize nursery operations and models climate-smart adaptation for coastal conservation.

Above: TNC and Alligator Head Foundation collaborate on conservation initiatives in East Portland, Jamaica. © Sheldon Levene

Right: CoralCarib partners pose together at a coral spawning training event in Jamaica. © Inilek Wilmot

Below: New solar units now support operations at Alligator Head Foundation. © Giovanni Rimann, Rimann Renewables



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The International Climate Initiative (IKI) is implemented by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (BMWK) in close cooperation with the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV) and the Federal Foreign Office (AA).



Partnership Spotlight

SCIENCE AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP UNITE FOR JAMAICA'S REEFS

CoralCarib's partnership with the National Environment and Planning Agency (NEPA) and local organizations was highlighted during Coral Reef Awareness Month last September. Joint activities included school outreach program, coordinated spawning monitoring dives, and data collection to inform long-term reef management. National media coverage elevated coral conservation as a national priority and highlighted the role of science and partnerships in protecting Jamaica's reefs. This collaboration reflects what is possible when science, local leadership, and shared commitment work together. By strengthening capacity, together we laid the groundwork for long-term reef protection in Jamaica.

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