

Dive Hard

The Kuwait Dive Team tackle the tough jobs



Dive Team spokesman Abdullah Al-Fadel

Others may ask 'what can we do for the environment?' But the Kuwait Dive Team ask a bigger question: What can we do that no one else can?

Since its founding in 1991, when a group of professionally trained divers banded together to raise ships which were sunk during the Iraqi invasion, the Kuwait Dive Team has been dedicated to carrying out the difficult tasks aimed at environmental restoration and protection.

The all volunteer organization has had outstanding success in its original mission. Over 150 wrecks have been salvaged, leaving a cleaner environment and clearing shipping lanes. In the process, the team has earned praise from the United Nations and the Cousteau Oceanographers, led by the son of the late Jacques Cousteau, Jean Michel.

Now, with the help of the Kuwait Oil Company and other sponsors, the group is tackling even more challenging tasks: the re-colonization of Kuwait's coral reefs, plantation of permanent anchor buoys and other projects for the continued maintenance of the oceans, including the removal of a three ton fishing net which was tangled in the reef.

For these and other projects, the team has been able to call on KOC for use of its boats and cranes. The company's greatest assistance has come its involvement in the creation of artificial colonies for coral reefs. For this project, as well as providing ships for transport of the concrete reefs, the company provided engineering help with construction of the artificial reefs.

KOC's Marine Service Department helped bolt together the large concrete slabs and engineers assisted with the design. "KOC has been a big help," says Abdullah Al-Fadel, spokesperson for the team. "We couldn't do it without them. Can you imagine how much this would have cost us?"

Mr. Al-Fadel says KOC management took an ac-



tive and sincere interest in the project. "We had a meeting with (former KOC Chairman and Managing Director) Mr. Al-Fulaij and he was very interested and very helpful."

As a non-profit organization, the support of companies like the Kuwait Oil Company is vital for the team. "What we do is not financially rewarding. When you remove nets, who's going to pay you for it?" asks Mr. Al-Fadel. "We have costs for maintenance and equipment, but we don't have a regular income."

Every member of the Dive Team volunteers their time and energy. They all have regular workaday lives and, as a group, refuse to engage in commercial activities. They have no core sources of funding and rely on donations and special project funding. But, because of the consistent quality of their work, the group is likely to remain liquid.

"Financing is a problem, but if you do a good job continuously people start to know you, believe in you and believe in your work." The group's solid reputation and good works have helped them in secure project grants from the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, the Environment Public Authority and the General Secretary of Waqf, a national Islamic charity fund dedicated to the betterment of the community.

In order to build the reputation needed to assure this funding, the group has gone well



Photos:
Top: The final design for artificial reefs

Bottom:
The reefs are home to a wide variety of fish

The Dive Team remove a 3,000lb environmental threat



Top - bottom
Coral reef growth



beyond their role as mere divers. To achieve their goals the team has developed significant skills in scientific research, management and public relations. Mr. Al-Fadel is the team's web-master.

For projects like the colonization of the coral reefs, the research element is vitally important. Considerable time and effort was spent making sure the structures to be used were the best ones available.

Earlier this decade, the group experimented with reef colonization using bundled tires, but discovered that these did not have the necessary weight or stability to encourage coral growth. "They weren't good because they weren't solid or stable," says Mr. Al-Fadel the current could move them and in order for coral to grow we need a very





Members of the Dive Team with oceanographer Michel Cousteau

stable place.”

The reef project was interrupted by the Iraqi invasion, and the recovery of sunken ships thereafter. But when that project was completed and their attention turned back to the reefs, they were dedicated to doing it better.

Concrete was a natural choice for stability and, notes Mr. Al-Fadel, it satisfied other considerations. “Concrete is good for the environment, because it’s basically the same as natural rocks.” Once that was decided, the more difficult decisions involved design.

The group originally went with an ‘anchor-shaped’ design. These structures were reasonably effective. As photos show, coral has begun to grow at an impressive rate. But the team always tries to do better, after an exhaustive search, they came up with an improved design.

The new design says Mr. Al-Fadel, is superior for several reasons. “It has small holes for small fish, it has a big space for bigger fish to go in and out, plus it has lots of open space. Sunlight is very important for the reefs and this is open from all areas. It’s not too high so boats can sail past. It’s not too big, so we can move it.” The design has been admired by the Cousteau team and has been endorsed by independent marine scientists.

The concrete slabs were donated by a local firm, the Kuwait Building and Construction Company, and bolted together by KOC’s Marine Services engineers. Once loaded on the boat, the plantation of the reefs requires more than merely dropping them randomly in the sea. The Diving Team has to carefully inspect the area most conducive to reef growth.

“You have to be really careful when you pick a location: you need an area where there are good currents and a solid seabed so the reef doesn’t sink,” says Mr. Al-Fadel.

The program has great benefits for all marine life, especially fish, but Mr. Fadel confesses that he’s most interested in the reefs themselves. “The fish do come after the reef but we don’t do this for the fish. Fish can be grown in tanks - what’s important is the reefs. The reefs are being destroyed.”

The artificial reef project is only part of the Diving Team’s work. As well as assisting in the growing of new reefs, the team is dedicated to preservation.

“The reefs in Kuwait are already very small because the weather in Kuwait is not very good for them. And they are being destroyed, by fishing anchoring and pollution. We’re have to protect what we have, as well as build new reefs,” notes Mr. Al-Fadel

Two recent projects, also assisted by KOC, sought

to do just that: the removal of a 3 ton fishing net tangled in the reefs and the plantation of anchor buoys, to prevent damage to the hard coral.

Coral requires sunlight and it only grows on hard surfaces. The snarled net smothered the coral, blotting out the sun and denying the reef an opportunity to grow. The team lifted the net using lift bags, the same type used to raise sunken vessels. For divers experienced in raising shipwrecks, salvaging a fishing net may sound like an easy task, but the process was made difficult due to the strong current and the hours required to undo the snarled web.

The team actually had to put off the mission several times because of sea conditions. “We should have done this months ago but the weather, waves and water conditions prevented it,” says Mr. Al-Fadel.

The reefs in Kuwaiti waters are predominately made of hard coral, which breaks easily and takes years to grow. With increased yachting, fishing and commercial activity, the reefs have been slowly chipped away by ships dropping anchor. By placing easy to use, sturdy, buoys the team hopes to resolve this problem.

To plant the buoys, teams of divers have to operate a special underwater jackhammer, driving steel rods

deep into the seabed. “The rod is solid metal and it goes two and one half meters down, so we don’t damage anything. We attach the cable, which is very strong and can hold eight or nine tons.”

The jackhammer is deafeningly loud, and the dust and sand it stirs up is blinding. Nevertheless, they relish the task.

“In some places we cannot use the hammer, and in those places we use concrete anchors. For that KOC helps by letting us use their boats.” The concrete anchors are remnants of an earlier attempt to colonize coral reefs. A team that operates on a tight budget knows better than to let anything go to waste.

That attitude includes data collection. The members of the team have varied background, and they may not always know how to analyze all of the information they collect, but they do know it’s valuable. “We’re not scientists but we are keeping records of all our information so it can be used by scientists,” says Mr. Al-Fadel. “All the information we collect is public, all the pictures and all of our work is public.”

Much of that information, as well as splendid underwater photography and details of their numerous other activities, is available on the team’s official web site, www.freekuwait.com.



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