



# CAN-049-Caymans's Trees-Cayman Islands

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Vic Ferguson

The World Federation for Coral Reef Conservation 281.971.7703 P.O. Box 311117 Houston Texas 77231

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## Cayman's Coral Trees

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### Cultivating Change



Times are hard for the oceans on planet Earth. There is no denying it folks, the underwater world is dying right in front of us, and being the odd bunch that we humans are, the general reaction to this is apathy, or at best, mild concern. Future generations will look back upon this time and ask why we were unable to raise enough interest in saving such a vital ecosystem. Or will they.....?

The way I see it, we are at a fork in the road, a point where things could go either way. We could let the oceans die, or we could draw a line in the sand and say now is the time when we recognise the ocean as more than just a food source and a garbage dump. This is the time when we accept the crucial importance of the world's oceans for our own future and realize how ludicrous it would be not to protect them. So, if this is the junction, which way should we turn?

Around the planet, there are groups of people who have no doubts about which route they want to go down, to carry on the metaphor, they handbrake turned the corner at full speed almost flipping the car in the process. People are working on some really cool projects that in one way or another help preserve the oceans. In amongst this innovative range of campaigns, the Cayman Islands have just made a big step in addressing the health of their tropical reefs which, like everywhere else, are visibly suffering under the pressures of modern life. The idea is to farm coral.

If you talk to a diver who has been in the sport for a few decades, conversation will usually come around to how nowadays, there is far less life underwater than there was in years gone by, unfortunately, the Cayman Islands are no exception. Of course that's pretty anecdotal but if you want a hard fact, according to a scientific study that was carried out by the Catlin Seaview Survey, the world has lost 40% of its corals over the last 30 years alone.



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As a region, the Cayman Islands are already ahead of the curve with their range of existing initiatives which include fixed moorings, protected species, marine parks, seasonal & limited fishing, lionfish control projects, the list goes on. Right down to the little details like banning divers from wearing gloves in order to discourage physical contact with the reef. The island is well governed and has a much focussed Department of Environment (DoE) who are out there on the water enforcing the laws that are designed to offer some hope to these beautiful waters and their inhabitants.

In addition to the DoE, there is a healthy community of scientific groups and concerned ocean lovers who work tirelessly on a variety of conservation projects. This latest activity is a perfect example as to how these groups can work together.

The regeneration idea is simple enough, take a little bit of coral from the reef, put it in an environment which accelerates its growth then when it has grown, plant some back and carry on growing the rest. Repeat. The DoE has issued six permits across the Cayman Islands to organisations that wish to farm coral as part of this project.

Ocean conservation is a beast of a topic. The plight is so complexly multi-layered that even just picking a place to start can be a daunting task. Problems like overfishing, acidification, pollution, invasive species and climate change all chip away at the health of the underwater environment and all feed off each other. Ocean Frontiers are one organisation that have been granted permission to install coral trees, Lois Hatcher gives a great example as to how connected these issues can be:



*"As controlling species like the grouper have been overfished, it means we are seeing increased numbers of damselfish. The problem with this is that damselfish are farmers and deliberately kill corals in order to grow algae on. So as the coral dies the environment becomes harder for fish to live in meaning that their populations continue to decrease. The result is less fish in the sea but overfishing continues"*

Such is the nature of an ecosystem that one little change

creates a ripple effect that spreads wider and wider.

## The Coral Tree Process

Before getting into the nuts n bolts of the project, it should be mentioned that the following process has been greatly assisted by Sea of Change who donated time, knowledge, money and materials to the nurseries.

First off, the project needed to be planned and one of the initial phases of that was to work out who will be involved. As I mentioned earlier, the DoE has issued six permits for people to grow coral. If you're wondering why the government body don't



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openly encourage everybody to have a go at making coral trees then John Bothwell, Senior Research Officer offers an explanation:

***"It's in everyone's interest to make sure that corals are protected, even from people who don't have bad intentions. And to make sure that no one looking to turn a profit in some way from harvesting corals is masquerading as a nursery operation. Coral nurseries require a fair bit of sustained effort to be successful. The permitting process puts in place protocols to make sure that whatever happens the corals remain the property of the Cayman Islands, and if the nursery has to close down the corals will not be abandoned, even if Government has to step in to do the final outplanting. Permits help to make sure that's what happens"***

Once permission had been granted, the six participants: Cayman EcoDivers; CCMI; Divetech; Ocean Frontiers; Sunset House and West End Coral Nursery then had to find appropriate locations. Keith from Sunset House recalls:

***"When we were choosing a site for our nursery, we considered water quality, shelter and accessibility. It is important for conditions in the nursery to be similar to that of the transplant site. Depth, sedimentation and water temperature also have to be comparable."***

Next up is the construction of the trees that the coral fragments will grow on. The idea of the coral tree comes from Ken Neidermeyer from the Coral Restoration Foundation. The trees are anchored into sand and then made buoyant with a float at the top. From the plastic piping that makes up the trunk, branches made from fiberglass are attached. Small fragments of coral are then suspended from the branches giving them total surface area exposure to the nutrient rich water. Jo Mikutowicz from Divetech says:

***"We started off with two trees because I wanted to make sure they would survive before setting up another seven. At the moment two trees are full of coral and a third tree is used as a quarantine in case of disease."***

And where do the corals come from? Many are carefully collected from the reef and this is of course the part we have to be careful with. ***"Our intention for now is to use only the fast growing branching Acroporids,"*** says Keith.

Further to finding suitable donor sites, Lois talks about other methods which can be used when possible:

***"Another way of sourcing corals to plant is called Corals of Opportunity. This is when a collector finds coral that has somehow been broken off the reef, they pick it up and re-plant it before it dies. Alternatively, if an area is under threat of destruction from something like an impending development then collectors can go and take coral from that as if they don't it will be killed anyway, this is referred to as Corals at Risk."***

When the corals are hanging on the tree, the work is far from over. They need weekly maintenance to clean them and keep them safe. After a growth period of 8-12 months they are ready to either be re-planted on a reef or broken into fragments to be put back on to the trees and re-grown. Hey presto, brand new coral!

The fantastic efforts that those involved with this project and others like it aren't nearly enough on their own to make the significant change that our oceans need. They are however, very important pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. The wider community needs to become more aware, educated and concerned about the plight of the ocean and what is needed to stop destroying it. This is a time when progress is being made, let's keep turning that corner.



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About the Author: Drew McArthur is a professional dive instructor and boat captain currently working at Divetech on Grand Cayman. Since his first dive over 20 years ago, he has found himself in all kinds of underwater environments from golf ponds on the side of a snowy Welsh mountain to the tropical paradise he has now become accustomed to. A fanatic of all things tech, one of the main things Drew loves about Grand Cayman is the accessibility of such premier dive sites. Check out Drew's blog [here](#).

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*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing" ...Edmund Burke*