

Good evening,

My name is Jerry van Daalen representing the dive community in Aruba and I have been invited to share some information about the marine environment in Aruba not as expert but as somebody who cares about Aruba's marine environment and deals with it on a daily base.

When I teach you how to dive and I tell you that you can only dive with 30 pounds of weight and that the next best thing is one of Antilla's anchors. You will dive happily for many years with 30 pounds doing the best to your ability until somebody comes up to you and says why don't you dive with 10 pounds, but because I was your teacher you are very hesitant to change after all I am the expert. But when that person tells you the advantages of diving with 10 pounds in relation to 30 and you decide to try it out you will be surprised that yes you can also dive with 10 pound and it also has more advantages.

I have been very fortunate to have been around the world more than 3 times, have visited many countries around the world and fulfilled my dreams in the sense where I have seen most animals even some close to extinction in their natural environment. Unfortunately I have also seen the other side of the coin where more and more natural habitats disappear and national parks are getting too small to maintain their diversity and the last remaining animals fall victim to poachers,

Of course there are also countries where people hunt anything no matter how big or small just to survive.

We complain when wildlife shows up at our doorstep but the truth is that we are invading their territories.

Now I have always felt the need to do something that could make a change for our natural environment and when I started diving about 15 years ago I saw an environment that seemed “unspoiled” with all its beauty and variety and so many animals still undiscovered. And I became an instructor to share this beauty and passion for marine life and work on conservation and preservation by educating people in the importance of responsible diving.

Besides donating to Greenpeace and World Wildlife fund, people often think there is not much more they can do but the people of Aruba show that is possible to make a change! In their spare time people do take an interest in Aruba's environment and do whatever they can in their ability to make a change.

Unfortunately there is only so much you can do, but this symposium shows that the government is interested, and with the information gathered at this symposium they might realize that we have been diving with 30 pounds for too long and we should try to dive with 10 pounds

We have come to a crossroad, and it is time to decide which way we want to go.

After all tourism in Aruba has generated jobs, income and housing for many people, but at which cost?

It seems unbelievable that only now people start realizing how much they contribute to pollution with the plastic bags gathered at the supermarket. And unfortunately there is still believe that the ocean is one great rubbish-bin taking care of it all.

That there is still no money return which we call statiegeld in Dutch on plastic and glass bottles. That metal and paper are not collected separately.

People trample on corals just to see a blue parrotfish, there are also people on Aruba that have come up with the idea of creating sea trek at the Antilla, and Arahsi, Then there are people who feel they have the right to cut mangroves to create another beach on their island and of course people that feel strongly about a dolphin enclosure and why not let's kill some more wild dolphins.

We seem so eager to cater for the tourist that Palm Beach has become a big contrast to the rest of Aruba. Tourist live their fantasy thinking they are kings on a tropical island and everything will be taken care of. Plastic cups linger on the beach until they end up in the ocean same goes for straws, bottles, and cigarette butts. But all these materials have a great impact on our marine life. A cigarette but will swell up inside a fish' stomach and eventually the fish will die of starvation. Sea turtles mistake plastic for jelly fish and feed upon it. Many animals and birds fall victim to our pollution and these numbers increase every year.

Our ocean environment today is not the same as it was yesterday and even though I am a strong believer nature will take care of herself we have to make sure it will be better tomorrow.

But we have to face the simple truth where environmental issues can't weigh up to commercial interest.

It is for this reason that after a storm beaches are frantically cleaned from seaweed that would otherwise strengthen it and add nutrients.

Just so tourists have pristine white beaches and of course no odours. But we also wonder why after ever storm our beaches get smaller due to erosion.

And how can it be that beaches that used to be prime nesting area for the leatherback, green, hawksbill, and loggerhead turtles can't be managed in a way that tourist bask there during day time while at twilight a zone is created were turtles can reach the beach in safety without any obstructions that would make them deter from laying eggs to never return again.

We have got to look at future trends in the tourist industry and how a healthy economy depends on a healthy environment.

Besides global warming, pollution and destruction by boats and mankind we still have a unique underwater environment which not has been explored to its fullest extent.

The variety of marine habitats is diverse, from sandy bottom to artificial reefs from rubble, rocky areas to beautiful sloping reefs down south. Than we have a coastal zone and mangrove area the nursing chambers of our ocean.

These areas together are responsible for diversity in marine life that needs to be protected for future generations.

In Aruba we have about 200 species of fish and still I discover new species or species unknown to exist in the Caribbean I have found invertebrates that still have to be identified not even talking about all the nudibranchs, flatworms, and slugs.

Before we look at conservation and preservation we have got to make up a balance of what we have.

Reefs in the last couple of years are starting to look better than before, baby beach has cleaned up after Yvan but also the reef in front of Renaissance-island

has come back significantly. And the shallows of Arashi show healthy corals.

But small changes can have a great impact like the dam built in front of Wyndham en phoenix hotel blocking currents from washing out silt and small particles deterring visibility.

What the effects are on reefs and dive sites can only be monitored by taking stock.

By knowing what we have and the roll animals and plants play in our marine ecosystem we can determine the impact we have on our environment and make changes accordingly.

As ambassadors of the reef divers are in the water on a daily base and can take notice of subtle changes.

It is this what made me come up with a plan that proved a little ambitious where every day we would monitor and document ; wind, air and water temperature, currents, visibility, unusual behaviour, when and where silversides show up, algae blooms,

coral bleaching, health of corals, fish species and abundance but also invertebrates.

This could help us in determine over period of time weather changes are a reoccurring natural cycle or caused by mankind.

It is my believe that following the future trends we should look at eco tourism attracting a whole new public and opening new ways to create income to sustain and protect our natural environment.

Our marine habitat should be protected by law as a Marine Protected Area,

Mpa's are areas of coastal land and water that are specifically designed to protect natural resources and ecosystems. Mpa's create a frame work for sustainable use and resource management that is designed to sustain coral reef health. Mpa's provide sites that allow for the preservation of biodiversity and the restocking of fish and shellfish populations. Also Mpa's can improve water quality by including adjacent watersheds as means to control the impact of sedimentation and pollution. Effective mpa's must be part of an integrated approach where coral reef communities are protected from multiple stresses. So

they can recover faster from any single disturbance. The two components of this approach are 1) an overall plan for sustainability and protection from activities that have direct impacts on biological diversity, 2) the presence of areas strictly protected from fishing and other extractive uses (no take zones)

An MPA will also benefit fishery as fish live longer, grow bigger and become more numerous.

By research we can create a better understanding about our marine world and monitor the effects we have on these fragile environments.

Let's look at long-spine sea urchins they feed mainly on algae but may also feed on mussels, sponges, brittle star and crinoids.

Sea urchins can destroy their own habitat by overgrazing causing erosion. On the other hand if large numbers die it also harms coral reefs. Which happened in the Caribbean not so long ago.

They live in shallow water on rocks in sheltered areas of coral reefs, in sandy lagoons and sometimes in sea grass beds.

This is a great example of how delicate the balance is in marine environments and we are fortunate to see an increase in numbers again.

Now another interesting report by professor Mumby shows us that Reefs are facing the risk of being damaged beyond repair by the influx of seaweed.

Reefs in the Caribbean are among some of the most heavily affected. They are rapidly transforming from coral dominated domains into algae flooded heavens.

One of the activities that boost the seaweed growth is overfishing.

Then to compound these problems you have the climate stresses that are more and more inevitable now, which cause major problems with hurricanes and warming waters.

The solution is rather simple we have to start protecting the large fish feeding on algae like the parrotfish which in many Caribbean islands are being overfished. According to professor Mumby an early recognition of the problem and protection of parrotfish still turn the tide but it is important to act before it is too late as reefs are resilient.

Many of these factors do apply to Aruba, where it seems there is no structural enforcement between legislation and law enforcement to protect Aruba's marine environment, People use drag nets to take any fish big or small from nature's nursing chambers our mangrove areas, dragnets are used on our prime dive sites as these places attract many species of fish with no discrimination to size or species and I still wonder if those nets have anything to do with the declining numbers of turtles we encounter on the dive sites.

And the reason why we should care

Fewer fish

Degraded habitat reduces the number and variety of fish, which are important for both attracting visitors and ensuring the health of the reef

Fewer living corals

anchors, chains and fishing lines scar coral reefs by breaking and crushing coral colonies and other reef-dwelling organisms

Fewer new corals

When a coral reef is reduced to rubble by inappropriate or irresponsible anchoring it becomes more difficult for new corals to grow, and the reef will further decline.

More stressed corals

Remaining corals will be stressed and therefore, more vulnerable to associated problems, such as coral bleaching events and diseases

More algae growth

The sediment filled scars are poor environments for new coral growth but good environments for fast growing algae, which may take the place of corals.

Cloudy water

Human impact can cause increase in sand and sediment in the water making once clear water appear cloudy or murky and preventing corals from getting the sunlight they need to survive. Reduced visibility due to cloudy water negatively affects the quality of visitor experience to a reef environment.

I have great respect for the people in Aruba that for years now have spent their own time and money and put their heart and soul in a cause they feel is important, people like Mr. and Mrs. van der Wal, Giolina Henriquez, and many more, also people in the water sport industry who have in the past created awareness for the protection of our marine environment and of course sustainability of water sports, I also know that the international school of Aruba is involved in reef and reef check projects but now is the time for the government to reach out and discuss how we can all work together in creating a better future for Aruba's natural environment, we have to set goals and find ways to create income. Rules must be set out for water sport operators as well as hotels or anybody making use of what should be an mpa.

Tourist can be charged a fee to dive or we could incorporate the fee as tourist tax for everybody that uses the mpa and every water sport operator contributes these fees to a foundation responsible for law enforcement but also, research, education and reducing pollution.

And as users of an mpa water sport operators should share their responsibility by operating within the guidelines set out to protect the fragile marine environment enhancing a hands off observation and contributing by educating people in fish identification, coral health, under water naturalist, peak performance buoyancy etc possibilities are endless.

And we don't stand alone we can learn a great deal from Bonaire who has paved the way in eco tourism and many organisations in the dive industry are willing to subsidise all kinds of projects. Dr Karen Eckhardt from widecast is more than happy to help us set up a monitoring program for sea turtles in Aruba, Dr Della Scott-ireton a leading marine archaeologist would be more than happy to help us set up an archaeological program for the conservation and preservation of our wrecks which have also formed artificial reefs with a great diversity.

I am still hoping for an environmental education centre on Aruba where we can teach locals, tourists and

children about what we have and how we should protect and conserve it.

Children have the future and not so long ago I was honoured to join Aqua team an initiative by John Wesley from Arcadia entertainment who took 8 children from different back grounds and with no knowledge what so ever about diving and snorkelling, they took their PADI open water course and then travelled around the Caribbean learning about sharks, marine biology, dolphins, and in Aruba they were joined by Della a leading marine archaeologist who showed them the basics of marine archaeology.

On our first dive they learned about the history of Pedernales and set out on an orientation dive and even though this dive was focused on marine archaeology they were astounded by all marine life surrounding the wreckage pieces.

The second dive we discussed the importance of a wreck as artificial reef and they set out to take some actual measurements.

The third day we dived Antilla which was everything Jordan, Gwynyth, Nick and Rachael had hoped for.

We talked about conservation and preservation of these places not only for their historical significance but also as artificial reefs offering protection to many species of fish corals, and marine life.

And I hope the efforts of the Aqua team were not in vain and will open the eyes of our government making them understand that the direction to take is that of eco tourism with proper management and legislation of our natural environments.

The program filmed in Aruba will air in February on discovery kids, and it will show the rest of the world what a great place Aruba is

lets us just make sure we do everything we can to keep it that way but let's do it together as together we stand strong.

For one man can make a change but together we can make a difference!

Thank you.

