



Passing on CoralWatch skills

TECHNOLOGY is assisting Rockhampton Grammar School students keep a close watch on our coastal waters to help with a broader scale of research.

CoralWatch, based at the University of Queensland, has developed mobile apps and is further educating teachers so the next generation can take a hands-on approach to reef protection.

To date CoralWatch has trained 31 ambassadors and received data from 79 countries.

RGS Science teacher Mr Phil Bessell attended a professional development session on Heron Island earlier this year and another round of teaching the teachers will take place in March 2019, this time on Lady Elliot Island.

Mr Bessell said CoralWatch was dedicated to educating the community on the pressures facing coral reefs across the globe and providing coral bleaching data to relevant authorities.

He said the CoralWatch program has also provided an opportunity to collaborate with current research scientists and leading professors in coral reef biology.

"The program has also helped increase my knowledge of marine environments and enhanced practical skills and research techniques," Mr Bessell said.

"At Heron Island we had lectures about coral bleaching, how to use CoralWatch survey slates, coral classification and setting up permanent transects and tagging coral colonies for regular surveys on the Heron Island reef flat."

Mr Bessell can now pass his own increased knowledge onto his science students.

"I've passed on these skills to the students so we could apply CoralWatch surveys and techniques to the local area, around Great Keppel Island, and use CoralWatch techniques in Year 11 Biology ecology assessment and Year 10 Marine Operations."

Mr Bessell is just one of many teachers at RGS passionate about both protecting and educating students about the reef.

Over the past five years more than 500 RGS students have directly contributed to monitoring the reef's health through the School's Reef Guardians program, which links into the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority's Reef Guardian Schools initiative.

This opportunity is more than just a fun day on the water with full-day weekend excursions to the fringing reefs of Great Keppel Island; it also provides valuable research.

RGS students, mostly from

Year 7 to Year 10, conduct their research through CoralWatch – an initiative now also supported by the Queensland Government's Department of Environment and Science.

Mr Bessell said the students used CoralWatch surveys to collect coral bleaching data, and marine biodiversity data using ReefSearch surveys.

"Our surveys have found that after cyclones, summer seasons and flood events the coral colour score (indicators of bleaching) were quite low but then within four to five

months, at the end of winter, the colour scores and coral had bounced back," Mr Bessell said.

"The research is indicating that the Keppel corals are quite

resilient and adapted to warm temperature and poor water quality events."

Mr Bessell said in addition to surveys, students also contributed to conservation efforts by removing marine debris from the local and island beaches and data collected is sent to Tangaroa Blue surveys.

"The CoralWatch program complements the students

learning, and ensures students become more environmentally aware and also learn about the local marine ecology," Mr Bessell said.

From March 7-10, 2019, workshop will be particularly relevant to those teachers with an interest in the marine sciences, aquatic practices, biology and STEM, and both senior and junior high school science teachers. (20 PD Points)

Teachers can register online before December 15 for an early bird discount at www.coralwatch.org.

MARINE SKILLSET

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MARINE LIFE: Rockhampton Grammar School students dive into CoralWatch in the waters off the Central Queensland coast. Photo: Damien Boicos