



MEDIA RELEASE

NEWS FROM THE INSTITUTE FOR MARINE AND ANTARCTIC STUDIES

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

Isolated Maria Island to host international workshop on marine biodiversity

Until now the human population of isolated Maria Island off the East Coast of Tasmania has been restricted to a few permanent residents in the form of Parks and Wildlife Service rangers, kept company by visitors such as day trippers and overnight campers attracted by the island's rugged beauty and its marine reserve.

However, on Sunday afternoon the visitors will include an influx of international and University of Tasmania (UTAS) marine researchers, preparing to 'rough it' during a two-week workshop to assess the effects of human activity on life in the sea.

The 20 international researchers – from the USA, UK, Canada, Chile, Argentina, the Canary Islands, the Galapagos Islands, South Africa, Indonesia and New Zealand – and the 14 UTAS staff members and students will be accommodated in the World Heritage Listed Darlington Probation Station, courtesy of the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service. The former convict rooms do not have electricity but the Mess Hall and Chapel will have power and internet facilities.

The workshop, led by Professor Graham Edgar and Dr Rick Stuart-Smith (a 2012 Tasmanian Young Tall Poppy Science Awardee) from the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS), will be based on the information collected through the Reef Life Survey (RLS) project.

The RLS was developed by Prof Edgar in 2007 through support to UTAS provided by the Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. It trains and supports

committed recreational scuba divers to collect detailed biodiversity data on a scale far greater than possible for scientific dive teams.

“IMAS is proud of its role in nurturing the Reef Life Survey dataset,” the Institute’s Executive Director, Professor Mike Coffin, said today. “It is massive in its geographic and taxonomic scope, encompassing more than 1800 sites in 36 nations, and covering more than 4000 marine species.”

The workshop itself is “something of an experiment for IMAS,” he added. “We are keen to see how it works out, both in terms of scientific productivity and outputs, and also in terms of social interactions and collaborative links established.”

Dr Stuart-Smith says the aim is “to improve understanding on how the world’s marine life is distributed naturally, and how natural patterns have been affected by human impacts such as overfishing, habitat destruction, pollution, global climate change and species introductions.

“Particular emphasis will be placed on filling gaps needed to better manage the conservation of marine biodiversity, including how managers can improve conservation outcomes when declaring marine protected areas.”

According to Prof Edgar, “This meeting draws on the efforts of enthusiastic recreational divers who have collected detailed ecological data worldwide, and support from our overseas scientific colleagues.

“We have now been able to establish a dataset on densities of fishes and other marine life that is many times larger than available for previous scientific study, allowing us to answer previously-unsolved questions associated with the great complexity of life in the sea.

“I look forward to seeing what new discoveries eventuate over the next two weeks, and the benefits these bring to management of our seas.”

www.reeflifesurvey.com

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