



Brian Sullivan, Todd Temple, David Chervin, Jon Evans take a break in the October sun between survey dives at Stillwater Cove. Photo by Megan Wehrenberg.

Volunteer divers check local coastal waters

By Timothy H. McKusick

The new Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), as part of the Marine Life Protection Act, of the Sonoma-Mendocino coast were the focus of Reef Check California this past weekend.

Reef Check California is a program of the Reef Check Foundation, which has been monitoring tropical coral reef communities in 90 countries worldwide since 1997.

According to Megan Wehrenberg, North/Central California Manager

of Reef Check and one of the organizers of the event, last weekend's underwater survey was part of the North Central Coast MPA Baseline Program. The "baseline" data will be used by the state to evaluate the effectiveness of the MPAs over the next five years and further in the future.

This program is a collaboration of California Sea Grant, Ocean Protection Council, California Department of Fish and Game, Ocean Science Trust, and MPA Monitor-

ing Enterprise. Data obtained is publicly available in their Nearshore Ecological Database (NED, www.ned.reefcheck.org).

They also provide the data directly to the Department of Fish and Game and to the MPA Monitoring Enterprise. This is a state entity focused on developing and delivering monitoring data essential for ensuring the long-term adaptive management of the new statewide system of MPAs.

Reef Check California, with the help of their team of "citizen scientists" conducted surveys of the near-shore rocky reefs. These citizen scientists are experienced SCUBA divers that have been trained to do a standardized scientific monitoring technique in which they measure the densities and abundances of 73 different

organisms including: fishes, invertebrates, and seaweeds, including selected invasive species. According to Jan Freiwald, PhD, Director of Reef Check California (who also oversaw the weekend's activities), buddy teams of two divers each, cover an area of the ocean floor approximately two meters wide, documenting all marine life within their given area.

About 25 volunteers joined the team over the weekend, coming from locations as far as Santa Cruz and Arcata, though most were locals from Sonoma and Marin Counties. The group used Stillwater Cove Ranch as their base of operations. Their study sites included Fort Ross, Gerstle Cove, Ocean Cove, Stillwater Cove, and Stornetta Ranch, near Point

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Arena.

Saturday's dive surveys at Fort Ross, Stillwater Cove and Stornetta Ranch (which was reached by boat) were productive as ocean conditions were favorable with mild swells and good underwater visibility.

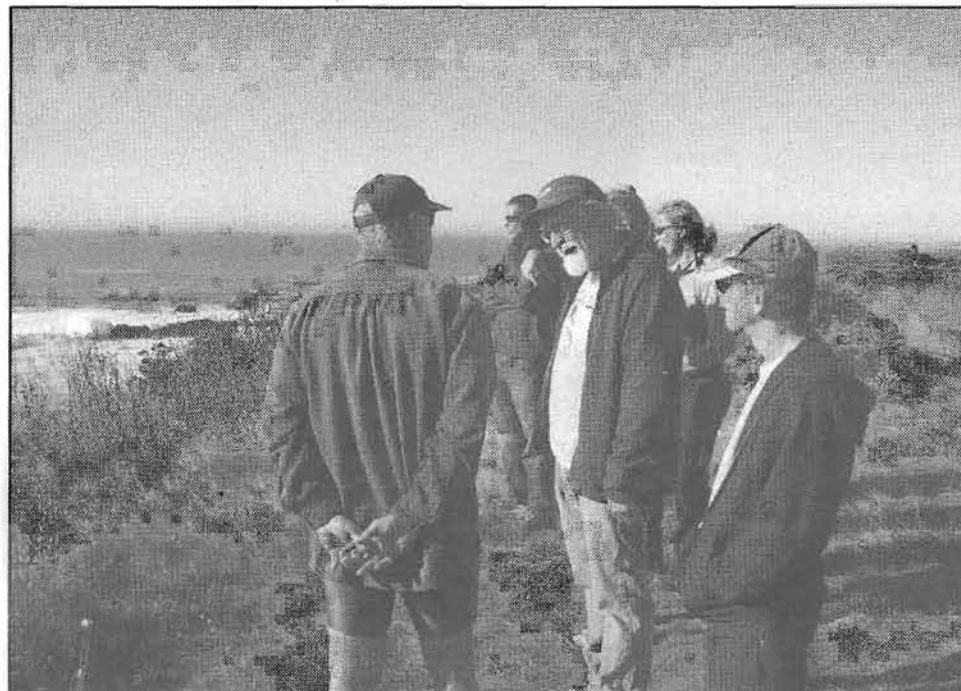
By Sunday morning ocean conditions had changed substantially, with high winds and large swells causing the group to postpone the dives at

Ocean Cove and Gerstle Cove. A local unit of Reef Check, led by a diving instructor associated with Sonoma State University, plan to do a follow-up dive this Saturday to gather data at the postponed locations. In spite of the altered dive schedule, organizers Wehrenberg and Jan Freiwald consider the weekend's work as highly successful.

Director Freiwald, who works at UCSC's Long Marine Laboratory, explains that Reef Check has collaborations with

other universities in addition to UC Santa Cruz.

At Humboldt State University, where they train their scientific divers in Reef Check survey methods, as well as UCSB and California State University Monterey Bay where they have student interns working with Reef Check as part of their undergraduate education and they also train scientific divers. Moss Landing Marine Laboratory is also involved, where they train divers and are able to use the facility.



Reef Check volunteers discuss the ocean conditions, which turned out to be too rough for Sunday's planned dives. Timothy H. McKusick photo.



Megan Wehrenberg, North/Central California Regional Manager of Reef Check gives the team of volunteers the morning briefing before they set out to do their surveys. They met in front of the 'Dairy Barn' at Stillwater Cove Ranch. Timothy H. McKusick photo.

The newly created MPAs that went into effect in May of this year in the north central region of the state extend from Alder Creek in Mendocino County to Pigeon Point in San Mateo County. These areas range from no take reserves to varied commercial and recreational rules and regulations in conservation areas.

Reef Check is part of a collaborative group of organizations and institutions tasked by the state

to do the initial baseline monitoring of these new areas. Reef Check's involvement in this important collaboration will not only help to ensure that the state has the data necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of these newly protected areas but will also give citizens an avenue to support and play active roles in the science-based management of our coast. The group is made up of divers, commercial fishermen, kayakers,

surfers, boaters, students, teachers — people from all walks of life who want to ensure our near-shore ecosystems are healthy and well managed.

Reef Check California has 201 active volunteers in 2010, surveying sites from Mendocino to San Diego Counties. In the spring of 2011, they will conduct training here in Northern California. For more information on this and other activities, go to www.reefcheck.org.