

Media Release

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First Australian CReefs expedition underway

Knowledge of life on coral reefs will be boosted from 2 April 2008 when a team of scientists led by AIMS heads for Lizard Island, north of Cairns, for the first CReefs Australian expedition.

CReefs Australia, funded by \$3.4 million over four years by the giant Australian resources company BHP Billiton in a deal brokered by the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, will address important questions about the diversity of coral reef associated species including how many species live on reefs, how many of these only live in this habitat, and how this diversity responds to human induced disturbance.

AIMS is leading the Australian node of the international CReefs project. CReefs is the coral reef component of the Census of Marine Life (CoML), a global network of hundreds of researchers in more than 80 nations engaged in a 10-year scientific initiative to assess and explain the diversity, distribution, and abundance of life in the oceans. The world's first comprehensive Census of Marine Life—past, present, and future—will be released in 2010.

The Institute has assembled a team of 25 scientists and support staff drawn from AIMS and a group of Australian natural history museums and herbaria to head to Lizard Island for a three-week field survey. The expedition, led by AIMS research scientist Dr Julian Caley, will systematically search waters around Lizard Island for species previously unknown to science.

The consortium is made up from scientists from the Australian Museum, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Museum Victoria, the Queensland Museum, the South Australian Museum and the Western Australian Museum, as well as the University of Adelaide, Murdoch University, the Australian Herbarium and the Smithsonian Institution.

Later in the year, there will be similar expeditions to Heron Island on the Great Barrier Reef and Ningaloo Reef off the coast of Western Australia. Three expeditions to each of these locations are planned over the next four years.

“We can't protect what we don't know exists or know how well we are doing it without comprehensive knowledge that can serve as a baseline,” Dr Caley said. “Taxonomy – the science of identifying and describing the natural world – is indispensable but has been in serious decline worldwide for many years, threatening our capacity to provide this understanding of natural systems. We hope this project can go some way to reversing this decline in capacity”.

The scientists will use a variety of methods to sample habitats around Lizard Island. Specimens collected from the sites will be analysed by taxonomic experts at a number of Australian natural history museums and herbaria who will describe and name new species, publishing their results in global, publicly available, databases and scientific publications.

As part of the BHP Employee Engagement Program linked to this project, several environmental staff of the company will be participating in each expedition, giving them unique insights into marine science. The Lizard Island CReefs team was officially farewelled on 31 March by the CEO of AIMS, Dr Ian Poiner, Ms Bindi Perkins of the Great Barrier Reef Foundation, and BHP Billiton's Mr Shane Hansen, Asset Leader of the Cannington Mine.



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