Hikkaduwa Coral Reef: Sri Lanka’s First Marine National Park

Posted on
Orange cup corals feeding in the current

Hikkaduwa has for long been the centre of sun, sand and surf in Sri Lanka and from the early days of tourism has been a popular stop for tourists travelling along the palm lined southwest coast. A major attraction in Hikkaduwa is its coral reefs and, over the years, the presence of the reefs has helped develop the town’s reputation as a destination for snorkelling and scuba diving.

Words and Photographs Nishan Perera

While coral reefs are found along much of the southern coastline, the reefs around Hikkaduwa are among the most diverse and accessible. Located close to the main road and in generally calm, shallow water, the reefs are an integral part of Hikkaduwa’s identity.

The main reef itself is a typical fringing coral reef with a shallow crest and in a sheltered lagoon with an average depth of less than 2m. The reef begins close to the fishing harbour and extends south around 4km. It plays an important role in protecting the coast from sea erosion.

> The reefs around Hikkaduwa are among the most diverse and accessible. Located close to the main road and in generally calm, shallow water, the reefs are an integral part of Hikkaduwa’s identity.

Around 60 species of hard coral have been recorded there along with over 170 species of reef fish. Large stands of cabbage-like Montipora corals and small stands of branching Acropora corals can be found, along with boulder type and encrusting corals. The reef was particularly well known for its colourful branching and table corals until 1998, when a rise in seawater temperature during an El Niño event resulted in a massive die off of corals at Hikkaduwa and throughout the Indian

Ocean.

While the reef may have lost some of its former glory it is showing signs of recovery. New coral growth is slowly taking hold and fish populations continue to remain healthy. Colourful reef fish such as angel fish, butterfly fish, parrot fish, snappers, and wrasses can be seen frequently among the corals, while schools of juvenile trevally find shelter from predators in the shallow lagoon. A few large turtles have also become resident there and can be approached by snorkellers.

> The ideal time to visit Hikkaduwa is between November and April when calm seas and good visibility prevail

The ideal time to visit Hikkaduwa is between November and April when calm seas and good visibility prevail. During the southwest monsoon from May to October the sea can be rough and underwater visibility is usually low. The easiest and cheapest way to experience the reef is by snorkelling, and the lagoon is a great place for first time snorkellers to experience a coral reef. The clear, calm waters are a great introduction for beginners and the abundance of marine life ensures that snorkellers have close encounters with numerous reef fish.

More adventurous snorkellers can venture out to the seaward side of the reef crest or take a boat out to the deeper coral patches near the rock outcrops. Here are healthy stands of hard coral and interesting reef formations protruding seaward like fingers of a giant hand. Called ‘spur and groove’ formations, these are created by erosion as waves batter the outer reef face during storms. If you are lucky you may even catch a thrilling glimpse of small reef sharks that patrol the edge of the reef.

For scuba divers, there is more to explore in Hikkaduwa. Beyond the shallow reef are numerous deeper reefs and rock formations teeming with marine life. Popular dive sites such as Kiralagala, Godagala and Black Coral Point provide endless opportunities for underwater exploration and photography. Several old shipwrecks are also frequented by divers and over the years have matured into artificial reefs that provide refuge to many species of corals and reef fish.

With its abundance of dive sites and the original influx of tourists, Hikkaduwa was the starting point for the recreational dive industry in Sri Lanka. There are now numerous dive shops catering to divers of all experience levels. If you are not yet a

diver it is a great place to start your underwater adventures by undertaking a professionally taught scuba certification course. For those not inclined to get wet, the reef may be viewed using a glass-bottomed boat, although it does not quite compare with experiencing the reef first hand underwater.

> Popular dive sites such as Kiralagala, Godagala and Black Coral Point provide endless opportunities for underwater exploration and photography

The Hikkaduwa reef has also been the flag bearer of marine conservation in Sri Lanka. The reef was declared a marine sanctuary in 1979, the first official marine protected area in the country. In 2002, it was upgraded to the status of a Marine National Park, the highest level of protection afforded to a marine eco-system.

The road to conservation has been a rocky one across many obstacles but Hikkaduwa has managed to retain its popularity among both tourists and scientists alike. In recent years there have been attempts to assist reef recovery through coral transplanting projects. While such attempts have had mixed results they have been pivotal in generating interest in coral reef conservation at Hikkaduwa and encouraged important partnerships between marine park managers and reef users.

The accessibility of the reefs have made it a perfect place for research and almost every Sri Lankan marine biologist has conducted research there at some point in their career. One of the best known is Hikkaduwa native Dr Ranjith De Silva, after whom Porites desilveri, a species of coral endemic to Sri Lanka has been named.

However, the popularity of Hikkaduwa has often been its greatest enemy, and irresponsible tourism has resulted in significant damage to the reef. The major causes of reef damage are by visitors walking on the reef, collision of glass bottom boats with the reef, and pollution. If you visit Hikkaduwa it is important that you act responsibly and also encourage others to do so in order to ensure that the fragile eco-system is protected for the benefit of generations to come.

