

Tourism woes in Boracay

By Neil Godbold



Boracay's long-running Funboard Cup, which would have celebrated its 21st year in January 2009, has been called off. Officially due to the worsening economic climate the event website announces that: "Because more than half of our participants are from the U.S.A and Europe, the event will likely not be financially viable. This is not a closure of the Boracay Cup – we look forward to resuming Asia's best boardsailing blast in 2010."

The Funboard Cup, first launched in 1988 by Boracay windsurfing pioneers Roby and Nenette Graff, encompasses everyone from weekend warriors up to the full-on pro riders for a week of competition. In the past three years, the Funboard Cup has grown further with the introduction of a kitesurf competition as Boracay has grown into one of the world's hot spots for that sport.

Boracay's problems are not all financial though. A series of environmental problems have gradually worsened over the past few years and then there is the recent ruling by

the Philippines Supreme Court supporting a proclamation by the President Gloria Arroyo to classify the major areas of the island as reserved forest and agricultural land, thereby calling into question much of the property development of recent years.

Boracay has rapidly expanded its tourism infrastructure to cater for the many thousands of visitors that flock to the island throughout the year. As a result there is now no low season for the island anymore – no chance for its heavily pressed ecosystem to re-coup and recover.

Towards the end of the 1990s, Dr Thomas Goreau of the Global Coral Reef Alliance was invited by the Ministry of Tourism to conduct studies on water quality and on the reef areas surrounding the island after fears were expressed about the health of the corals. At that time, Dr Goreau warned of the problem of sewage disposal as the population increased and advised improving the island's treatment regime so that less pollutants went directly into the sea: the

existing treatment produces an effluent that contains nutrients thousands of times too high for coral reefs to tolerate.

In 2007 Dr Goreau returned to Boracay to conduct further surveys at the request of Linc, an environmental NGO brought in by the Boracay Foundation Inc (BFI) to address the by-then worrying state of the island's reefs and sea water quality.

The 2007 report shows that the earlier advice had not been heeded and indications are of a continuing decline. Further observations from Dr Goreau show that the new sewage treatment plant installed after 1997 did not fully address the problems of outflow into the sea: "The sewage outfall in Bulabog Bay is in only 20 feet of water, which is far too shallow. The sewage wastewater, being less dense than seawater, floats right up to the surface, where it is spread wherever the winds, waves, and currents carries it. When the winds are onshore, as they are around half the year, the noticeably foul-smelling water is pushed

directly onto the beach. When the winds are not onshore, the sewage is spread wherever the currents carry them. This is often along the coast of the island, as can be seen by the distribution of algae in shallow water.

“The abundance of algae has provoked the growth of exceptionally dense populations of long spine black sea urchins, which graze the algae down every day only for it to grow right back. Since the bay is used for water sports for half the year when the winds and waves are too strong on the other side, many tourists fall into the water are painfully impaled on the sharp sea urchin spines. What they can't see is far worse for human health. The high level of bacteria in the sewage-filled water causes epidemics of ear infections, skin infections, septic infections of cuts, and severe stomach problems for swimmers, boaters, kiteboarders.”

Following Dr Goreau's second report, the problems are beginning to be directly addressed, but now comes a new crisis. The new land classifications, imposed by the government and endorsed by the Supreme Court, mean that many of the areas that have been developed by the tourist industry fall into what is now classified as reserved forest and agricultural land and as such should not have been sold and developed on. It is now therefore the intention of the government to dispose of the land and developments through the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR): in effect current land and property could be sold off to the highest bidder and some removed altogether.

It is only really now that the ramifications of this judgement are beginning to be understood by property owners on Boracay and there are sure to be protracted legal challenges to follow.

The silver lining according to Linc is that the government has posted its intent to instigate an environmental master plan through the DENR to address the current ecosystem problems, which would be funded through the monies raised from the proposed land disposal.

Environmentalist Lee Ann Ford, founder of Linc, is hoping for the best: “The situation on Boracay is difficult and disappointing. It should have never gotten this far.”



Young the key to conservation

This year's Asia Dive Expo (ADEX), Asia's largest dive exhibition, will for the first time feature an Ocean Conference at which international experts will share their insights on pressing marine conservation issues.

Herman Ho, managing director of TMX Show Productions, the organisers of ADEX said:, “Never before has such a stellar line-up of internationally renowned experts convened to discuss the various aspects of the marine environment. We are confident that the topics discussed at the ADEX Ocean Conference will not only inspire marine enthusiasts but also the general public to adopt the ‘save the marine ecosystem’ cause.”

The experts will include the famed explorer and National Geographic photographer, Emory Kristof; marine biologist and curator of the public aquariums in Singapore, Helen Newman; and multi-award winning photographer and

environmentalist, Neville Coleman.

ADEX will be held on April 3-5, 2009 at Suntec Singapore and will as usual showcase the latest in dive equipment, resorts and lifestyle products. ADEX 2009 also plans though to focus on educating and inspiring all visitors – not just divers – and especially students, to do their part for marine conservation.

They are introducing this idea using the theme, “Save the Sea, Be a Diver”. Their intent is to boost the number of young people coming to the sport and hopefully thereby increase the sense of urgency in preserving marine ecosystems from extinction as a result of destructive fishing, coastal development and climate change.

Added Ho, “Future generations play a crucial role in protecting the marine environment, as such ADEX 2009 aims to educate and instil a sense of environmentalism in the young.”

See www.asiadiveexpo.com for details.