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IMAS
INSTITUTE FOR MARINE & ANTARCTIC STUDIES

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In the wake of Matthew Flinders, citizen scientists mapping Australian coastal marine life

Two hundred years after Matthew Flinders circumnavigated Australia and mapped much of the coastline for the first time, community citizen scientists and IMAS researchers are now following in his wake to record marine and shore life along the coast.

Over 100 volunteer divers from the global citizen science program *Reef Life Survey* have so far conducted more than 6500 dives at 1800 sites around the coastline, collecting unique first-time records in the shallow coastal regions to allow future changes in fish and shellfish populations to be accurately measured Australia-wide.

Professor Graham Edgar, who established *Reef Life Survey* and leads IMAS research into its findings with colleague Dr Rick Stuart-Smith, said the data collected were a unique resource used by researchers, government and the community.

He highlighted the dedication and enthusiasm of volunteer divers in expanding the reach of data collection across spatial scales impossible for dedicated teams of scientists to cover.

“You could say we saw Matthew Flinders as our inspiration,” Professor Edgar said.

“Flinders circumnavigated Australia, mapping out the physical features, the headlands, the bays and the depths.

“Two hundred years later we’re following in his footsteps, only this time we’re mapping the biological features.

“We’re counting the number of fishes, mammals, sharks, reptiles, sea urchins, crustaceans and molluscs, as well as coral and seaweed cover.

“So far we’ve recorded numbers of over 3000 species around the coast.

“These data will be used as reference for the next 200 years as a record of the biological environment at this time, providing an irreplaceable reference point to assess future change in the marine environment.

“What was until now invisible under the sea is becoming visible through the efforts of our *Reef Life Survey* diving community.

“We’re creating a comprehensive record so people can be aware of exactly what changes are happening, how threats to our living heritage are distributed, and how managers might best deploy their resources to remedy those threats.”

“*Reef Life Survey* divers have recently repeated five months of surveys at over 250 sites across the span of the Great Barrier Reef and Coral Sea, providing detailed information on how fishes and other marine life were affected by coral bleaching last year.

“These surveys provide a unique record of marine life before and after the largest known bleaching event to date, complementing the work of other researchers monitoring impacts on coral.”

Professor Edgar said that in addition to its records of Australian marine life, *Reef Life Survey* also operates internationally, with surveys conducted at 3000 sites globally by divers in 50 countries.

Reef Life Survey data have formed the basis of four articles in the prestigious international science publication *Nature* by IMAS researchers as well as many other articles in leading journals. In 2014 the research was also recognised with an Australian Museum Eureka Award.

Reef Life Survey also provides one of the world’s most comprehensive and useful field guides to global marine species using information and images collected by divers globally:

<http://reeflifesurvey.com/species-search>

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