

Environment report released

The Bay of Bengal Large Marine Ecosystem Project (BOBLME) has just released a new report aiming at helping Thailand manage its extensive marine parks, by providing background information on the vital work of conserving the marine environment.

Key points from the report:

* Thailand's Andaman Sea coastline, extending 740 kilometres from Myanmar to Malaysia, contains vast and often irreplaceable undersea resources and presents a continually difficult balancing act between exploitation and protection.

* There are some 400 hard coral species covering 72 sq kms of this coastline (62 per cent of which is theoretically protected in marine parks) and 11 species of sea grasses covering 95 sq kms (34 per cent protected). Mangroves grow on 1.7 million sq kms of the coastline.

* The Andaman Sea's renowned ecological diversity includes dugongs, several dolphin species and four species of sea turtles (leatherback, green, hawksbill and olive ridley) that live among the

multitudes of fish and other forms of sea life.

* Some 10 million visitors a year take holidays along the Andaman coast.

* The six western coastal provinces of Ranong, Phangnga, Phuket, Krabi, Trang and Satun between them enjoy a vast bounty from the sea. Fishery products provide 50 per cent of Thailand's annual protein intake in 2004.

How does Thailand balance these conflicting usages and demands?

Simply put, with ongoing difficulty, as is the case elsewhere in the world.

Thailand's partial answer has been to protect sensitive natural areas by establishing marine and land parks.

* Since the 1960s the country has drawn protective boundaries around 23 marine parks along its Andaman coastline, covering 2.6 million hectares. Some 20 per cent of its land is also preserved as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, the report said.

* There are five types of protected areas: national parks, national marine parks, wildlife conservation areas,

forest parks and non-hunting zones.

Phuket has only one marine-protected area (MPA), the Sirinath National Marine Park near Phuket Airport, and one non-hunting area – Khao Phra Thaew Non-hunting Area in the north of the island.

* Threats to the marine parks come from a lack of trained manpower for effective enforcement. Overfishing and destructive fishing methods, such as blast fishing (using explosives to kill large amounts of fish) and cyanide, now threaten 60 per cent of the country's coral reefs.

* Sewage and other pollution from Phuket's high visitor rate and property development, as well as the rise in sea temperature from global warming, add to the list of pressing concerns.

BOBLME's National Coordinator for Thailand is Praulai Nootmorn, Director Marine Fisheries Technological Research and Development Institute at the Thai Department of Fisheries. Dr Chris O'Brien helps to co-ordinate the project's work from his Phuket office at Makham Bay.