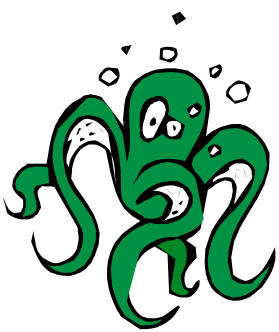


People and Places

Coral Gardens

About the Place

It was low tide, and a group of women from a village in Fiji were walking on a coral reef with a Bahá'í marine scientist called Dr Bowden-Kerby. A trail of crushed shells showed that an octopus had been in the area eating clams and shellfish. The group walked a bit further, and sure enough, one of the women found an octopus just under the water munching on a baby eel. The octopus swam off in a cloud of black ink.



It was a good sign, because it meant there was food on the reef for the octopuses, and for the coral-eating Crown of Thorns starfish who also fed there. But both had enormous appetites and most of the reefs were dying. As well as pollution killing the coral reefs, fishermen using dynamite fishing to catch the fish were also to blame. They would dynamite the reefs, leaving just a pile of rubble, and the dead and stunned fish would float to the surface to be scooped up in nets. It seemed an easy way to fish, but it was destroying the reefs, which meant there were less fish to catch. And this meant that people were going hungry. Something had to be done to save the reefs.

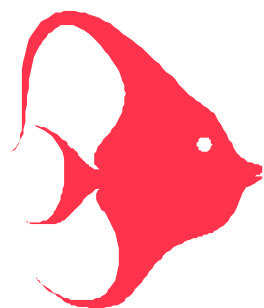
“If you dynamite a coral reef, it cannot repair itself,” said Dr Bowden-Kerby.”

He had found one solution to this problem: if you scatter broken branches of coral onto the rubble, the corals often attach themselves to it and slowly begin to grow and spread. But when you do that, the coral reefs need time to grow again, so these areas need to be cordoned off and no one should fish there (including the greedy octopuses and starfish!) until it had a chance to recover.

“So what we have to do is learn to walk with nature to help it to recover,” said the doctor.

As well as cordoning off some places where reefs had been replanted

and asking people not to fish there until these areas had a chance to recover, he knew the fishermen needed to understand why they had to change their way of fishing and find a way that did not cause so much damage. And it was



no good just a few fishermen changing their ways: it would only work if everybody did. When he explained to the villagers what was happening, and how they could do something to bring back the fish, they all wanted to help. Before long, women, children and men were all looking after the coral reefs and protecting them in every way they could.

“Plenty of fish are coming back,” said the chief of one of the villages. “You could not find them here a few years ago. But they are coming back now, every kind of fish.”

Dr Bowden-Kerby said he did not do this on his own. He talked to the islanders and listened to what they had to say. He learnt many things he did not know before. For example, he never knew until they told him that branching corals can travel four hundred feet under the sea during a storm, and pieces of broken coral will roll along the ocean floor and come to rest somewhere and then start to grow a new reef.

The doctor uses the Bahá’í teachings to help him in his work. As well as praying, he consults with the islanders – not just the men who do the fishing in deeper waters, but the women who fish in the areas close to the land. He also, of course, believes in the harmony of science and religion, and this is a way for both of these to work together. Because he loves and respects the people and cares what happens to them, he is also able to use his scientific knowledge to help them. When the islanders realised how much harm was being done, they were very happy to help to protect their coral reefs.

“The people are excited,” said a member of the environment committee. “Fish are coming out of the taboo [no fishing zone] areas. Migrating species, like the mullet, have come back especially.”

Many countries have become interested in what is being done to rescue the reefs around Fiji, and governments are giving money so that the good work can be spread to other places.



About the Person

Dr Austin Bowden-Kerby grew up in the United States of America, in North Carolina and Virginia. He lived near the coast and had loved the sea since he was a child.



“We lived barefoot all summer,” he said, “and would go swimming several times a day. We would go fishing and crabbing at high tide and clam digging at low tide, eating what we caught.”

When he was about thirteen or fourteen years old, he went with his parents to live in the Pacific Islands, where he discovered that the beautiful coral reefs were in danger and people were becoming ill because there was not enough good food to eat. Young Austin had been brought up to love God, and he said, “I would pray each night, asking God to help the sick and poor and make world peace.”

When he was seventeen, Austin became a Bahá'í.

Some Facts about Reefs

Reefs are formed by a bony substance made by tiny creatures called polyps (e.g. sea anemones)

There are thousands of polyps and they feed on small particles of food floating past in the water.

Reefs also have algae (like tiny plants but without leaves or roots) covering them. These are called (wait for it!) zooxanthellae! Isn't that a fantastic word?

Things to think about:

1. Coral reefs are called nurseries of the sea. Can you think why?
2. They are important for many reasons:
 - a) they provide shelter and food for the tiniest fish who may otherwise be gobbled up by larger ones;
 - b) they provide food for people when the fish become full size and swim off into the ocean to be caught by fishermen;
 - c) they contain substances used in some medicines;
 - d) they protect the sandy shore from being washed away by the sea.
 - e) Can you think of another reason why they could be important to the poor people living in these islands? (clue: it has something to do with tourists).