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Mangroves aided by replanting exercise

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Rotaract Blue Club volunteer Omari Corbin.

By Karen Clarke
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Efforts to restore the mangroves in Grand Cayman received a boost recently when the Rotaract Blue Club joined the Department of the Environment (DoE) and the Reef Ball Foundation in replanting the endangered flora along South Sound.

Ben Chisholm, Project Coordinator in Reef Ball's Mangroves Division, explained, "The goal of this project is to restore the mangroves lost in Hurricane Ivan."

He said the project began in November 2006 with the establishment of the nursery at the Cayman Islands Sailing Club.

"It was a great effort for Rotaract to get involved in; they were extremely helpful," he said, adding that he was very impressed with the volunteers who came out for the Saturday, 7 June replanting.

Timothy Austin, Assistant Director of Research and Assessment at the DoE, said the mangroves in South Sound took a devastating hit during hurricanes Ivan and Dean, making natural recovery very slow. He also pointed to human destruction of these natural protectors of the shoreline.

"Mangroves are an extremely important part of marine and terrestrial island ecosystems and many important local species depend on them at some stage during their life cycle," he said.

"There are very limited laws with regards to protection of mangroves in the Cayman Islands and subsequently large areas of coastal mangrove stands have been removed and continue to be removed at an alarming rate."

Mr Austin added that the project is raising awareness of both the value of mangroves and their highly threatened status in Cayman.

"Climate change and other recent events have meant that globally there is an increasing awareness of the importance of mangroves; however, Cayman has been slow to catch up," he said.

O'Dell Suarez, Rotaract Blue President, said it was very important for the community to get involved in the project. "I am extremely proud of my Rotaractors - it was a fun, worthwhile exercise," he said.

Mr Austin spoke of the important role that service organisations can play in protecting the environment. "The value of volunteers with these kinds of projects is tremendous and without the help of teams such as Rotaract we would be able to accomplish very little. Volunteers allow the limited funds available to these types of projects to be used in creative ways to accomplish a great deal more," he said.

"The next stages will be to monitor the progress of the mangroves planted out to date and hopefully to build on those successes," Mr Austin added.

Rotaract Blue member Robert Baraud said he was pleased to take part in the environmental project. "I think it is a fascinating programme because (it counteracts) the loss of mangroves and trees that offer protection for marine life and shorelines," he said.

The programme will also prevent further erosion for areas that do not have sea walls. Mr Baraud added, Replenishing mangroves is important to restoring and maintaining oceanic ecosystems, he explained, pointing out that they "provide sustained protection" for shorelines.

Expanding further on the importance of mangroves, he said they act as a filtering system, control pollution along shorelines and serve as a habitat for marine and terrestrial animals.

Mr Chisholm said the Reef Ball Foundation had identified another method of restoring mangroves that would save time and money. Instead of waiting 18 months for the mangroves to grow to a size where they could be planted, the fruit (propagules) could be harvested and planted using a system that protects it from high winds and wave action.

The Reef Ball Foundation is a publicly supported, non-profit, international, environmental organisation working to rehabilitate marine reefs. Mr Chisholm said the foundation brings together volunteers from different walks of life to work on projects in various locations.

Mr Suarez added that Rotaract Blue will continue to help replenish the mangroves. "We'll be doing collection drives in the future," to gather propagules for further replanting exercises, he said, adding that the wider community is encouraged to participate in any future endeavours.

Funding for the project was made possible through the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the DoE. The Reef Ball Foundation received additional support from Cayman company Rainbow Realty, local doctor Barry Richter and Florida-based Spurlino Foundation.

Mr Suarez added that in keeping with the club's motto, 'Committed to making a positive difference' through service in the local community, the organisation would be holding its first annual Open Arms Award on Saturday, 12 July to honour those caring for people with disabilities.

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