

## **Project Update: May 2014**

I wanted to share a very exciting piece of news with you regarding my project on groupers (12245-2) that Rufford has supported in the past three years.

As a part of this project (and together with my first Rufford project 9016-1) our team had managed to discover and monitor a spawning aggregation of the square-tail grouper (*Plectropomus areolatus*) in Lakshadweep in 2011. This was the first such report of a reef fish aggregation from India. When we found the aggregation, it was completely unknown even to the local fishermen. In the course of the past 2 years, fisheries in Lakshadweep have been undergoing a big change and reef fishery is being promoted on a large scale owing to the decline in pelagic tuna catches in these islands. As a result, the once pristine spawning aggregation started becoming a target for local fishermen (commissioned by new market forces from the mainland). Our team has been monitoring the aggregation for 4 years and our data showed us stark declines (over 40%) in the spawning population in just a 1-year targeted fishing effort.

Earlier this year, we worked with the community in Bitra (the island where this aggregation is found) and garnered support from the fishermen and fishing community for the conservation of this unique spawning aggregation. We then approached the Lakshadweep administration with this conservation initiative. As a result of these collaborative efforts, in March 2014 the Lakshadweep fisheries department has passed a fishing regulation which bans commercial fishing activity on Bitra reefs for one week (around the new moon), every month of the grouper spawning season (i.e. from December to April).

This is a milestone initiative and a first of its kind in India, which offers protection to a marine fish species which is not scheduled in our Wildlife Protection Act. It is also the first such temporary or 'floating' marine reserve in India and signifies the conservation of a natural resource without alienating the community which depends on it.

I wanted to personally thank Rufford for their time and consideration and providing us funding for our projects in Lakshadweep. I wanted to acknowledge the Rufford Small Grants Foundation for their role in the success of this conservation effort. We look forward to engaging with this initiative in the coming seasons and we hope for your continued support of the same!

I also wanted to share a paper, an academic outcome of my first project, which came out earlier this year. Also, attached is an article on the fishing regulation published in a national newspaper in India.

<http://epaper.deccanchronicle.com/articledetailpage.aspx?id=490796>