



Snorkelling with an Eco Friendly Snorkel Company

I have enjoyed a few snorkelling tours around South East Asia, mainly in Thailand, but I joined one while staying in Koh Tao which impressed me so much I really wanted to let people know about it. AC Tours promotes an Eco Snorkelling Trip at no extra cost than most of the other trips on the island. On the day of my trip there was also a Green Fins representative on board and it was her who gave me the idea of writing about my experiences.



Once on the snorkelling boat it soon became apparent just how committed Phil Goble, the owner of the company (see photo right), was to looking after the environment. Every spare space of wall on the boat was displaying some sort of conservation message including guidelines for friendly snorkelling, why Phil is against feeding the fish, garbage breakdown rates in the sea, the rules AC Tours has to abide by to be a Green Fins member and many more.

Furthermore, Phil then gave us instructions not to flush the toilet when at a snorkelling site to avoid organic matter loading problems associated with it, that nothing is to be thrown overboard, to put all recyclable rubbish into the appropriate bin, to use the ashtrays provided and that there will, under no circumstances at all, be any sort of fish feeding on his tour. He explained that by feeding the fish the other tour and diving companies are teaching the fish to be reliant on this as a source of food which is upsetting the natural balance on the reefs and the unnatural foods are actually harming the fish. I'm now ashamed to admit that I have partaken in fish feeding on past snorkelling tours because I just didn't know the negative impacts of my actions. I can assure you now though that I will never do it again, and I will not hesitate to try and stop others from doing it too.



Our first stop was Rocky Bay, a popular place for small black tip reef sharks. Before our first dip in the water Phil gave us a thorough safety and environmental briefing warning us how easy it would be for us to inadvertently kick the fragile corals while we are adjusting our new kit and getting used to snorkelling. He offered us life jackets if we felt at all unsure letting us know that this will reduce the chances of us harming the coral with our fins. He pointed out the shallower areas of the site asking us to avoid them as there are many little new corals growing which are very

delicate and will help to rejuvenate the site which has suffered some damage over the years. Phil was also very keen to let us know that the sharks will not harm us and gave us a lot of information about how they breathe, their life cycles, choice of food and why they are found at this site. Adding to the fascination of the trip so far, I was a lucky one and saw 2 sharks!

Our second stop was at a site called Aow Leuk, a bay on the south eastern side of the island. Before our snorkel Phil reiterated the safety and environmental points he'd made at the first site and then offered, to those guests who were interested, a little reef fish ecology talk. Well, of course everyone stayed for it! He used pictures to point out a number of different species we might see, not just the colourful reef fish we will all notice anyway, but he brought our attention to the perhaps slightly less attention-grabbing species and what their roles on the reef are. This included Christmas Tree worms and how they respire, Parrot fish and how they can change sex and colours throughout their life and



that their poo makes the sand of the beaches, the Sergeant Majors and how fish feeding is changing their behaviour noticeably at this site. On that snorkel I explored the reef and am positive that I saw so many more things due to the little bit of extra knowledge Phil had given to me. While I was pottering around I noticed a little boy who was constantly but apparently unintentionally kicking the coral. Before my trip I would not have had the courage to say anything, but the information Phil had supplied gave me the confidence and the passion to ask him to be a bit more careful because what he was doing was harming corals which would have taken hundreds of years to grow. He was quiet embarrassed, and so was I, but he was extremely careful after that!



With our bellies full of the lunch handed out on the boat we headed onto our third stop at Hin Wong, or circle rock in English. This was a particularly beautiful site. This time, Phil offered us a coral biology talk and again all of the guests stayed to listen, this time with much anticipation. With the use of pictures Phil talked us through the basic structure of coral showing us that there is an animal and plant living symbiotically within the walls of the corals, and he explained their complex relationship. He took us on a journey through the lifecycle of the corals paying particular attention to the reproductive

behaviour. And then he finished by explaining the biology of coral bleaching and why it occurs. There is so much hype at the moment about this particular subject, and I really thought I knew what coral bleaching was, but after this talk I realised that I really had no idea. It's funny, I've always considered myself as quite an observant person, but before that snorkel at Hin Wong, I'm not sure if I had ever even noticed corals and just how beautiful they are!

Loaded with this extra knowledge we then enjoyed more snorkelling at Lighthouse Bay and finally at Nang Yuan. We had a bit of time at Nang Yuan to explore the island and walk up to the famous view point to enjoy the sight out over Nang Yuan, Koh Tao and the Gulf of Thailand.

The information Phil gave us on this trip really opened my eyes to the responsibility we have as visitors to these beautiful locations and how our ignorance on a mass scale, can lead to the degradation of the places we are lucky enough to carry memories of for the rest of our lives. I can honestly say I will make sure that my next snorkelling company of choice does not endorse fish feeding on their tours. Through witnessing the threats and degradation of the reefs Phil relies on to make a living, he has made a decision that it is his responsibility to teach himself more about the environment he introduces to people every day, and to pass this information on to let them know how they can help protect it. This attitude is pretty rare, and I am full of admiration for it. Thanks for a great day!

