

Students ship out to study Andaman



One of the students in the study project snorkels near Koh Phi Phi to witness coral bleaching. SUEBPONG SA-NGUANSILP

Marine ecology project has made a big splash on campus for the past 20 years, writes **Achadtaya Chuenniran**

Thirty-five students from universities across the country recently participated in an annual summer camp project which offered them an opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of marine ecology in the Andaman Sea during the summer holidays.

The project offers a one-month intensive course in marine ecology designed for students and it is the longest-running study project of its kind in the country.

The project was initiated 20 years ago and has continued until today.

This proves how popular the project is and how instrumental it has been in promoting a keen awareness of natural resources conservation among the participants.

This year, the marine ecology summer camp was held between April 18 and May 21.

The project is a collaboration between Chevron Thailand Exploration and Production, the Phuket Marine Biological Centre and Walailak University's school of science and the university's science and technology education park. Walailak University is in

Nakhon Si Thammarat's Tha Sala district.

Eligible participants must be at least second-year university students and they must have a knowledge of basic ecology. Swimming and diving abilities are also required.

Students must write an essay and submit it to a selection committee to consider.

The summer camp project is aimed at encouraging students to think for themselves, learn to live with others, solve problems and promote the concept of natural resource conservation among them.

The one-month course provides students with first-hand knowledge of marine ecology, the relationship between the environment and human life, and the role of humans and their effects on the ecological system.

The students also have an opportunity to meet top experts and researchers in marine ecology.

During this year's summer camp, the students boarded the coastal survey ship *Chakthong Thongyai*, which belongs to the Phuket Marine Biological Centre, on a trip to Koh Phi Phi in Krabi.

They learned to use life-saving equipment and how to live aboard the ship.

While at sea, crew members worked together to use a machine to excavate earth and soil from the bed of the Andaman Sea and put it on the ship so students could sift through it and determine its composition.

Pitipong Tantichodok, the project manager and director of Walaailak University's science and technology education park, said the project's marine ecology course has been oversubscribed since it was first introduced, proving a perennial favourite among students.

However, the project was once suspended when he suffered an accident, Dr Pitipong said.

He said that while many students apply each year, only about 30-35 are selected.

Dr Pitipong said many sectors such as tourism, energy and fishing depend heavily on marine resources, but the country still lacks personnel with sufficient knowledge in the field to manage natural resources and tackle environmental problems, such as coastal erosion and coral reef bleaching.

He stressed the need to produce more researchers in marine studies and said that the government must allocate more funding for this purpose.

Paleerat Nuchpho, a 21-year-old student from Chiang Mai University, said she has developed a deep interest in nature and had decided it was time to see the world and have a close-up look at the marine environment.

Joining the course gave her the opportunity to travel to Phuket — 1,400 kilometres away from where she studies — and the chance of going on such a long excursion at sea was hard to come by.

She said she is now concerned about the coral reef bleaching phenomenon and is keen to know how the problem can be remedied.

Ms Paleerat said she has gained useful education and experience from the summer camp.



A ship officer shows the students the route map of the *Chakthong Thongyai* and the marine survey locations. PHOTOS BY NAUVARAT SUKSAMRAN



Students sort out the small marine life in dirt dug up from the sea bed and from survey locations out at sea.



Students participating in the summer camp are briefed about the safety features of the ship and what they should do in various situations such as if they get seasick.



The students mingle aboard the coastal survey ship *Chakthong Thongyai*, which belongs to the Phuket Marine Biological Centre, on a trip to Koh Phi Phi in Krabi.

"The one-month course was exhausting but it was fun," she said, adding that she would apply her knowledge for the good of society.

Rujikorn Seriom, a fourth-year student from Kasetsart University, said the summer camp was a worthwhile experience which can't be found in classrooms.

"I focus on marine studies. Unfortunately today, there is a lot of rubbish in the sea. When I joined the camp, I was taught about environmental degradation in the sea and what could be done to reverse the situation," he said.

Mr Rujikorn also noted that a concerted effort from everyone who is party to the destruction of the marine ecology was sorely lacking.

"We can't act alone. We may have to band together in a network to see the problem through," he said.

Riewphai Chanchit, a student from Mahidol University, said that while he found the one-month course was too short, it was nonetheless intensive and extremely stimulating.

"A month of hands-on activity is so much more rewarding than one full year of learning in the classroom," he added.

Phachoensuk Theeranukul, also a Mahidol student, said the project also gives the students from various universities across the country a chance to build up a network to keep in touch with each other after their time at the camp comes to an end.

He said many students agreed to create a network of contacts to exchange their knowledge about marine studies, hoping they can work together in the future for environmental conservation.

Hathairat Atichart, manager of policy and public affairs of Chevron Thailand Exploration and Production Co, said the company is proud that it has supported the project for 19 years.

"The company believes in the power of humans to act for the common good," she said.



Students take a look at small aquatic animals taken from the sea that have been put in a glass container.



University students slip on goggles and life jackets before a dive to see coral bleaching in the sea near Koh Phi Phi.