

**Coral Reef Ecology, Health, and Conservation  
Lab/Field Experience  
Spring 2021**

**EVPP 491-201 (CRN 20679)/BIOL 491-201 (CRN 21554)**

Exploratory Hall, Room 2602

Thursdays, 1:30-4:10 p.m.

Instructors: Dr. Esther Peters, Dr. Thomas Wood  
Backup Instructor: Dr. Jennifer Salerno  
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Office Hours: Dr. Peters: Thursdays (4:30–5:30 p.m.) or BY APPOINTMENT\*  
Dr. Wood: BY APPOINTMENT\*

\*Please send an e-mail request for an appointment to either Dr. Peters or Dr. Wood. Preferably confirm by e-mail if you are will meet either in person or in Zoom at least 24 hours in advance.

Sign up for Mason Alert (e.g., weather closings, emergencies) at <https://alert.gmu.edu>

See Emergency Preparedness Guides at ([http://ehs.gmu.edu/guides\\_EP.html](http://ehs.gmu.edu/guides_EP.html))

COVID-19 news: <https://www2.gmu.edu/news/2021-01/safe-return-mason-starts-you>

**Prerequisites**

Permission of the instructor (contact Dr. Peters)

**Additional Requirements**

A previous course in coral reef ecology or registration in the concurrently offered 3-credit lecture course for Coral Reef Ecology, Health, and Conservation.

**Course Description/Overview**

Students will learn about current coral reef ecology and conservation knowledge and efforts, as well as the environmental and anthropogenic stressors threatening coral reefs and the

organisms that inhabit them. This 1-credit field experience course allows students to experience in person the beauty, biodiversity, productivity, and demise of coral reefs by participating in (1) on-campus sessions to learn about reef species identifications, underwater research methods, and journal writing, and (2) an off-campus 7-day trip to the Caribbean island of Roatán in May, immediately following graduation. There, students will study the natural and societal aspects of coral reefs, reef evolution, research being conducted on Caribbean reefs, and the diversity of approaches to conserve reef resources. They will stay at Anthony's Key Resort and participate in the educational program at the Roatán Institute for Marine Sciences (RIMS), be introduced to the reef biota and apply reef organism identification skills as they practice collecting reef condition data through SCUBA diving or snorkeling on nearby reefs, learn about marine mammals and interact with the Atlantic bottlenose dolphins in the dolphin Encounter program, and visit the RIMS coral nursery to learn about coral husbandry and reef rehabilitation programs. In addition, advanced SCUBA divers will learn skills to complete training as scientific divers under George Mason University's American Academy of Underwater Sciences (AAUS) program. This international field component will deliver real-world experience during a semester-long course that provides the intellectual basis for understanding this unique ecosystem.

### **Learning Objectives**

On completion, students will be able to:

1. Understand the complexity of coral reefs and their conservation through witnessing the current condition of the reefs in Roatán.
2. Describe the geology of these ecosystems and their relationship to other ecosystems such as mangroves and sea grass beds.
3. Identify different types of corals, as well as families of fishes and other reef creatures and discuss the symbiotic and ecological relationships they have with one another.
4. Apply scientific reasoning to conservation issues and collect, record, and process information associated with their observations.
5. Discuss global and local threats affecting Roatan's reef organisms and how they impact the ecosystem and are linked to human health (as related to the 'One Health' concept)

### **Instructor Expectations**

Class participation will be required of each student, according to the course schedule below. Students are expected to read books and journal articles, study supporting materials, and prepare assignments outside of class. Students are required to organize material logically and communicate effectively orally and in writing. Students will be expected to participate in all activities, behave properly, and must adhere to all policies and rules during the Roatán

field experience, which will also involve more strenuous physical activities of SCUBA diving or snorkeling.

Attendance in classroom sessions or by Zoom is required. Tardiness and absenteeism should be limited to illness or emergencies. Dr. Peters should be notified PRIOR to the start of class if a student will not be in attendance. Students should come to class ready to participate in all activities with assignments and readings completed prior to class, behave in a mature and professional manner, and abide by the GMU honor code.

**All students taking courses with a face-to-face component are required to take Safe Return to Campus Training prior to visiting campus. Training is available in Blackboard.**

Students are required to follow the university’s public health and safety precautions and procedures outlined on the university Safe Return to Campus webpage. Similarly, all students in face to face and hybrid courses must also **complete the Mason COVID Health Check daily, seven days a week**. The COVID Health Check system uses a color code system and students will receive either a **Green**, **Yellow**, or **Red** email response. Only students who receive a “green” notification are permitted to attend courses with a face-to-face component. If you suspect that you are sick or have been directed to self-isolate, please quarantine or get testing. Faculty are allowed to ask you to show them that you have received a Green email and are thereby permitted to be in class. Please be sure you wear your mask during our sessions. Use the hand sanitizer from the dispenser on entering the room (and as you need it!).

More students are juggling work, research, internships, shadowing, and families, as well as COVID-19 issues. Please note “employment must not take priority over academic responsibilities. Students employed more than 20 hours a week are strongly urged not to attempt a full-time academic load. Students employed more than 40 hours a week should attempt no more than 6 credits per semester. Students who fail to observe these guidelines may expect no special consideration for academic problems arising from the pressures of employment.” (University catalog, section AP.1.2. Academic Load, see: <http://catalog.gmu.edu/content.php?catoid=27&navoid=5365#attendance>). Please consider your responsibilities and interests and plan accordingly to protect your health and GPA! Please contact Dr. Peters if you have any concerns during the semester!

**E-mail Communications**

The instructors will send e-mail messages only to your GMU e-mail account, usually through Blackboard. Students must use their Mason email accounts—“MASONLIVE” account—to receive important University information, including messages related to this class. See

<http://masonlive.gmu.edu> for more information. **Please be sure you check it often and respond to queries from any of the instructors!** If you are not getting messages (e.g., MasonLive issues), please send Dr. Peters an alternate e-mail address.

### **Lab/Field Experience Assignments**

Students will gain skills pertinent to working in environmental science, biology, and conservation, including:

#### (1) Reef Study Methods

To understand different reef habitats and detect changes in the species present and their health, scientists measure numerous environmental parameters and collect samples of organisms for further chemical, geological, physical, and biological laboratory analyses. Students will examine recent peer-reviewed literature on coral reef monitoring methods and prepare tools to use in collecting data for one protocol, the Atlantic and Gulf Rapid Reef Assessment (AGRRA), while in Roatán. Undergraduates will learn how to apply AGRRA methods.

#### (2) Reef Organism Identification

Students will review text and online taxonomic keys and images to learn how to identify corals, fishes, and other organisms with the instructors. They will be exposed to many of these species on the trip to Roatán. A species' identification quiz will be given prior to the trip. Undergraduates will learn how to correctly identify 40 species of fishes and 10 species of corals.

#### (3) Journaling

Documenting what is happening in the environment and thinking critically about your observations is an important skill to be applied when keeping laboratory notebooks or field logs. During the field trip to Roatán, students will be immersed in the environment and making observations on the habitats and organisms present on this Caribbean island. They will perform coral reef survey techniques by snorkeling or SCUBA diving and compare the condition of different reef sites based on fish, coral, and benthic organism (plant and animal) populations. They will also make observations on societal, economic, political, and other factors related to coral reef conservation. To assist in developing your skills and learning through these observations, whether you participate in the field trip or not, students will learn about Front Line journaling and Reflective journaling. More information, rubrics, and practice assignments will be provided during this course.

## Readings

(1) Required (Selected chapters will be assigned, links posted in Blackboard):

1. *Caribbean Reef Life: A Field Guide for Divers*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Mickey Charteris, 2017. Mill City Press, purchase online
2. *Healthy Reefs for Healthy People*, [www.healthyreefs.org/cms/publications](http://www.healthyreefs.org/cms/publications). The Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative (HRI), *A Guide to Indicators of Reef Health and Social Well Being in the Mesoamerican Reef Region* (2007) and *Quick Reference Guide* (2008)
3. Atlantic and Gulf Rapid Reef Assessment, [www.agrra.org](http://www.agrra.org)
4. *Roatan Institute for Marine Sciences' Instructors Manual: Planning a Field Course*, will be provided by the professor.

(2) Other recommendations, if interested:

1. *Towards Reef Resilience and Sustainable Livelihoods: A Handbook for Caribbean Coral Reef Managers* (Download at <http://www.researchstationcarmabi.org/>).
2. *Coral Reefs in the Anthropocene*, ed. Charles Birkeland, Springer, 2015. Available online from the GMU library.
3. *The Coral Reef Era: From Discovery to Decline, A History of Scientific Investigation from 1600 to the Anthropocene Epoch*. James Bowen, Springer, 2015. Available online from the GMU library.
4. *A Guide to the Coral Reefs of the Caribbean*. Mark Spalding, 2004, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA. (Amazon, \$14.95)

(3) Assigned Readings (ALL STUDENTS):

- All assigned readings are listed in the course schedule, posted on Blackboard, and should be completed PRIOR to class.

Additional Resources:

Study guides and resources for helping with identification are provided on Blackboard and will be presented in class. These focus on coral, fish, and invertebrate identifications.

## Grading

Class Participation	25%
Organism ID Quiz	25%
<u>Journaling Assignments</u>	<u>50%</u>
Total	100%

For undergraduates, the final grade will be based on this scale: A+ = 100–98%, A = 97–93%, A- = 92–90%, B+ = 89–86%, B = 85–83, B- = 82–80%, C = 79–70%, D = 69–60%, F < 59%. A CURVE WILL NOT BE APPLIED.

### **Course Materials**

See required textbooks under Readings, above. Students will need SCUBA or snorkeling equipment for the field study, which may be rented from George Mason SCUBA LLC or at Anthony’s Key Resort (mask, snorkel, fins of their own are recommended; Dr. Wood will discuss options), and should provide their own sun protection (e.g., lycra diveskin or 3-mm wetsuit, or yoga pants and rash guard, booties, hat or hood), and sturdy closed-toe walking shoes (in addition to waterproof sandals, flipflops are not recommended).

### **Honor Code**

The GMU code of honor states that cheating and attempted cheating, plagiarism, lying, and stealing will not be tolerated. Honor code violations discovered by either students, staff, or faculty will be referred to the Honor Committee. Unless otherwise noted by the instructor, quizzes will be taken without the use of study aids, memoranda, textbooks, other books, data, or other information available. The purpose of these assessments is to evaluate the student’s progress in understanding the material.

It is important to note that materials produced for this course require creativity in organization and presentation, but that the information presented within the paper or other product must be properly acknowledged as to its source. Statements of a general nature or that synthesize information from several sources need not be attributed to a specific source; however, statements of specific details or direct quotations (“between quotation marks”) from books, journals, newspaper or other media articles, Internet web pages, or other authorities must be identified with the name of the author and year in the text and the full citation provided at the end of the paper or other product

### **Additional Areas of Mention (University Policies, Resources, etc.)**

WRITING CENTER: <https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/contact>; [wcenter@gmu.edu](mailto:wcenter@gmu.edu)

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES: “Ask a Librarian” <https://library.gmu.edu/tutorials/librarians-help>

COUNSELING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS): <http://caps.gmu.edu>

LEARNING SERVICES: 703-993-2999; <http://caps.gmu.edu/learningservices/>; offers many good study skills workshops!

ACADEMIC COUNSELING PROGRAM: 703-993-2380:

<http://caps.gmu.edu/learningservices/academiccounseling.php>

The University Catalog, <http://catalog.gmu.edu>, is the central resource for university policies affecting student, faculty, and staff conduct in university academic affairs. Other policies are available at <http://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/>. All members of the university community are responsible for knowing and following established policies.

Student communication of e-mail information:

<https://provapps.gmu.edu/hb1app/>.

**COURSE SCHEDULE\* AND ASSIGNMENTS (complete PRIOR to class):**

**\*Schedule is subject to change based on weather conditions or other events.**

EXPL 2602 has been limited to 12 students due to the pandemic. If we have up to 12 students, all will meet at the same time on the FIRST date listed for each Week. If we have more than 12 students, they will be divided into two groups and one group will meet on the first date and one on the second date. Students who are not scheduled to meet will study course materials on their own during that week’s session. Please let Dr. Peters know if you have any questions or concerns about this schedule!

Week	Date	Topics	Readings for Next Class
1	January 28	Introductions, explain preparation and plans for field trip, assigned readings and learning objectives, course focus, journaling and participation, snorkeling and dive training overview	Caribbean Reef Life, identifying reef organisms
	OR		Journal article(s) on reef monitoring (individual or by groups) to report on next session
2	February 4 <b>MEET AT 3:00 PM TODAY</b>	Introduction to field research, coral reef organism identifications: What do we need to know about coral reefs, why, and how? Structure vs. function, diseases of reef organisms.	Atlantic and Gulf Rapid Reef Assessment protocols ( <a href="http://www.agrra.org">http://www.agrra.org</a> ), indicators and training tools
3	February 11	Continue lecture and discussion on field research: Monitoring protocols for coral reefs, journal articles reviewed	Study fish, coral, and other species identifications, applications in monitoring coral reef condition
	OR		Journaling practice assignment
4	February 18	AGRRA Protocols Journaling instruction	

5 OR 6	February 25 OR March 4	Design AGRRA reef monitoring tools and practice species identifications  Discuss journaling practice assignment  <b>BE SURE TO SUBMIT GEO APPLICATION FOR THE ROATÁN TRIP BY MARCH 10!</b>	Study fish, coral, and other species identifications, applications in monitoring coral reef condition  Journaling practice assignment
7 OR 8	March 11 OR March 18	Discuss journaling practice assignment  Review of coral and fish species identifications with Dr. Peters and Dr. Wood  Build AGRRA tools and copy data sheets	Study fish, coral, and other species identifications  Journaling practice assignment
9 OR 10	March 25 OR April 1	Discuss journaling practice assignment  Practice using AGRRA tools and data sheets  TBA: GEO Breakout Session for Roatán: Review travel information, room assignments, safety procedures, etc.	Obtain snorkeling or SCUBA gear (consult with Dr. Peters and Dr. Wood)  Study fish, coral, and other species identifications
	TBD Required	<b>GEO TRAVEL (All Programs) PRE-DEPARTURE ORIENTATION</b>	Time and location to be announced
11 OR 12	April 15	WATER TIME – Swim evaluations, snorkeling training, and SCUBA diving refresher at the GMU Aquatic and Fitness Center  Date(s) of this are currently being arranged, may occur on other days during this week	Study fish, coral, and other species identifications  Schedule fish and coral quizzes with Dr. Peters and Dr. Wood
13 OR 14	April 22 OR April 29	Take fish and coral quizzes  Distribute AGRRA tools and data sheets to students to pack	<b>Prepare checklist for packing for Roatan, be sure you have all medications, masks, safety aids, snorkeling or diving gear and the AGRRA equipment you will take to Roatán, minimize clothing (this is a dive resort, not a fancy luxury resort), maximize foot protection</b>



<p>15 OR 16</p>	<p>May 6 OR May 13</p>	<p><b>NO FINAL EXAM!</b></p>	<p><b>PACK FOR ROATÁN TRIP!</b></p>
<p><b>UNIV 308 Field Trip to Roatán</b></p>	<p><b>May 15–22</b> <b>(DRAFT)</b></p> <p>Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Saturday</p>	<p>Fly to Roatán, unpack, welcome dinner, journaling RIMS orientation, dive/snorkel checkout and reef trip, RIMS lectures, reef trip to practice species identifications, journaling Dive/snorkel reef trip on way to Maya Key for picnic and tour of Animal Sanctuary and Rescue Center, dive/snorkel reef trip on return, journaling RIMS mangrove lecture and snorkeling trip to see mangroves, beach snorkel/dive to conduct reef survey, RIMS Dolphin Lecture I, journaling RIMS lecture on reef threats, beach snorkel/dive to conduct survey, boat trip to snorkel/dive at RIMS Coral Restoration Nursery, Dolphin Lecture II, BBQ Fiesta, journaling Beach snorkel/dive to conduct reef survey, Dolphin Swim, RIMS Night Dive Lecture, night dive, journaling Trip to Blue Harbor Arboretum &amp; Hydroponic Garden, RELAX, PACK Fly home</p>	

**Notes:**