

Reef Visual Census (RVC) Fish Survey Protocol for U.S. Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico

National Coral Reef Monitoring Program (NCRMP)
Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

Introduction

The National Coral Reef Monitoring Program (NCRMP) is a broad-spatial snapshot for reef condition (*i.e.*, fish species composition/density/size, benthic cover, and coral density/size/condition) to provide context for local-scale studies of tropical reef ecosystems. Data collection will occur at stratified random sites where the sampling domain for each region (*e.g.*, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), Flower Garden Banks (FGB) and Florida) is partitioned by habitat type and depth, sub-regional location (*e.g.*, along-shelf position) and management zone. NCRMP will provide broader geographic context to supplement local monitoring efforts and studies of tropical reef ecosystems.

NCRMP fish surveys conducted in the US Caribbean/Gulf of Mexico region (Puerto Rico, USVI, FGB) have traditionally used the belt transect method. In the Pacific and Florida regions, fish surveys are conducted using the Reef Visual Census (RVC) point count method (Brandt et al., 2009). To standardize fish data collection methods and for comparison purposes, all jurisdictions will be using the RVC method for conducting fish surveys beginning in 2016. This protocol will describe fish surveys conducted in the U.S. reefs in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico.

The 2017 RVC protocols for USVI have substantial differences than previous versions (years) as a result of NCRMP standardization throughout the project's regions (*e.g.* Florida and Pacific regions). Specific differences in methodologies between regions, where applicable, are noted within the protocols. For the 2017 sampling season, fish and benthic teams will survey concurrently where applicable.

Goal of Fish Surveys

The goal of the fish community surveys is to collect and report information on species composition, density, size, abundance, and derived metrics (*e.g.*, species richness, diversity) using the RVC method in a stratified random sampling design on hardbottom and coral reef habitats in the U.S. coral reef jurisdictions. While all jurisdictions will use the RVC method, slight adjustments must be made in order to account for regional implementation nuances. This protocol is intended for the USVI 2017 sampling season and may be refined in subsequent years.

General Task Description

The Reef fish Visual Census (RVC) method is modified from Bohnsack and Bannerot (1986), and occurs with the diver remaining at a fixed site. Fish are surveyed within an imaginary 15 m diameter cylinder centered on the diver and extending vertically from the substrate to the limits of vertical visibility, sometimes the surface. In the U.S. Caribbean, RVC will be implemented by a team of two divers, each conducting a 7.5 m radius stationary point count fish survey. Data collected by the team of two divers are averaged to reduce variability at the site level. This differs

from Florida, where two individual teams, each with two divers, are deployed and each pair is averaged respectively. This is the difference between a 1-stage and 2-stage survey design, where the 2nd stage is used to reduce variance.

Line Point-Intercept (LPI) and Coral Demographic surveys are not collected at all fish sites. However, sites that require both fish and benthic surveys, a team of two benthic divers will be deployed simultaneously with the two diver fish team (Appendix I; Figure A), and establish the benthic transect on the appropriate habitat with the least amount of interference with the fish surveys. Refer to *Benthic Assessment Protocols for the U.S. Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico: 2017* and *Coral Demographic Survey Protocol for the U.S. Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico: 2017*.

RVC Diver responsibilities include collecting:

- Fish information
- Overall topographic information
- Benthic cover information
- Site photos

General Site Information

Navigating to site

Once in the field, the boat captain navigates to selected site using a handheld GPS unit. On-site, divers are deployed and maintain visual contact with each other throughout the entire census.

****Divers should always be aware of dive buddy and make frequent visual contact with dive buddy throughout entire dive (this includes during surveys as well)****

1. Each boat will have up to three (3) GPS units:
 - a. One (1) for navigation to sites, and
 - b. Each boat will have one (1) dive flag/float with a GPS unit attached. This set up is unique for each boat and will be used by the fish and benthic teams to mark the site for surface support, to mark a starting point for the dive teams and to verify site location with computer generated sites. Record each team's unique GPS # and dive flag numbers on the daily boat log (Figure 1; Appendix II).
 - c. If using a GPS unit other than handheld to navigate to the sites, a handheld GPS is used to collect topside waypoints (see #3 below)
2. Dive teams enter the water at selected GPS coordinates, descend to bottom, affix the surface float line to the bottom, set up survey areas and begin data collection.
 - a. If benthic team is diving with the fish team, **ALL dive teams should enter the water as close to the same time as possible.**
3. As the dive team(s) deploy from the vessel, the boat captain will use the handheld GPS to mark a waypoint of the surface float/flag and record the coordinates on the boat log (Appendix II).

4. Once all surveys are completed all divers convene at the affixed float line and begin their ascent to the surface together.

****Boat drivers will safely mark waypoint, after divers have descended****

Establishing the cylinders – Evaluating the Site

Upon decent, the team assesses the suitability of the site by ascertaining: (1) presence/absence of hardbottom, (2) observed habitat type, and (3) visibility of the cylinder.

1. As the team descends and assesses the site, the fish team ascertains the presence of hardbottom.
 - a. Hardbottom presence/absence
 - i. Present – If hardbottom is present, continue habitat type assessment
 - ii. Absent – If hardbottom is not visible at the the site (no hardbottom at all, *i.e.*, continuous sand or seagrass combined with limited visibility),
 1. Then the dive will be terminated and an alternate selected,
 2. **Do not swim around searching for hardbottom – this is not reconnaissance.**
2. Observed habitat type – If the team(s) deploy over hardbottom they are to establish cylinders where deployed.
 - a. If necessary, during descent, divers will swim to appropriate habitat within visual range
 - i. If divers enter the water over sand, they will swim to nearby reef habitat for sampling.
 - ii. If divers enter the water over hardbottom different from that expected **and** observe expected habitat type within visible range from where deployed, they will swim to expected habitat for sampling.
 - b. If divers enter the water over hardbottom different from that expected and **do not** observe expected habitat type nearby, they will establish cylinders where deployed and indicate the alternate habitat on the datasheet and boat log.
3. When a benthic team deploys with the RVC team, benthics to set up adjacent to the cylinders if possible, using the same anchor point for the belt transect. Benthics can swim to nearby hardbottom if it is patchy where the RVC is established, if they remain in visual context with the RVC divers and the surface float (Appendix I).
4. Under optimal visibility conditions, the distance between dive buddies should be 15 m (Appendix I). The surface float can be secured to the bottom and serve as a starting point to measure the radius of the sampling cylinder using the All Purpose Tool (APT; *i.e.*, 7.5 m or 5.0 m depending on visibility) as a:

- a. Determine visibility of cylinder.
 - i. If horizontal visibility is greater than or equal to 7.5m, then the radius of the cylinder will be 7.5m.
 - ii. If the horizontal visibility is less than 7.5m but greater than 5m, then the diver will set up in the middle of a 5m cylinder and slightly move from the middle to observe the area needed to fulfill the 7.5 m cylinder. The APT (Figure 1), or some other type of marker, can be used to mark the initial midpoint.

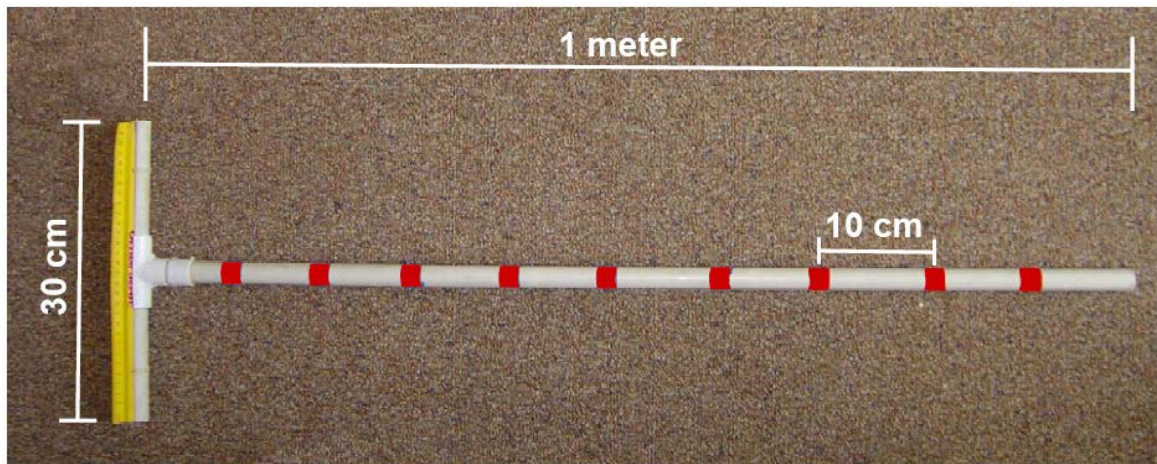


Figure 1. The All Purpose Tool (APT) used as a tool for measuring benthic relief, estimating fish lengths, and the dimensions of survey cylinder.

Additional APT uses:

- Visual aid to measure visibility and fish sizes
- Point of reference (e.g., edge of cylinder, fish measurement) during data collection
- Point of return for both divers following data collection

5. **Terminating the dive** – Certain environmental conditions are not safe for operations and surveys should be automatically terminated and alternates chosen when:

- a. **Visibility is less than 5 m**
- b. **Bottom currents are strong enough that the divers cannot maintain a stationary position,**
- c. **Depth of the selected site is greater than 99 ft.**

Reasons to terminate a dive:

- Visibility (< 5m)
- Strong currents
- Depth (> 99ft)

**** ALWAYS** Indicate reasons for terminating dives on boat logs**

RVC Sequence of events

RVC data collection occurs in three phases: (1) Pre-dive, (2) fish counting/measuring, (3) and site/benthic/topographic assessment (Figure 2).

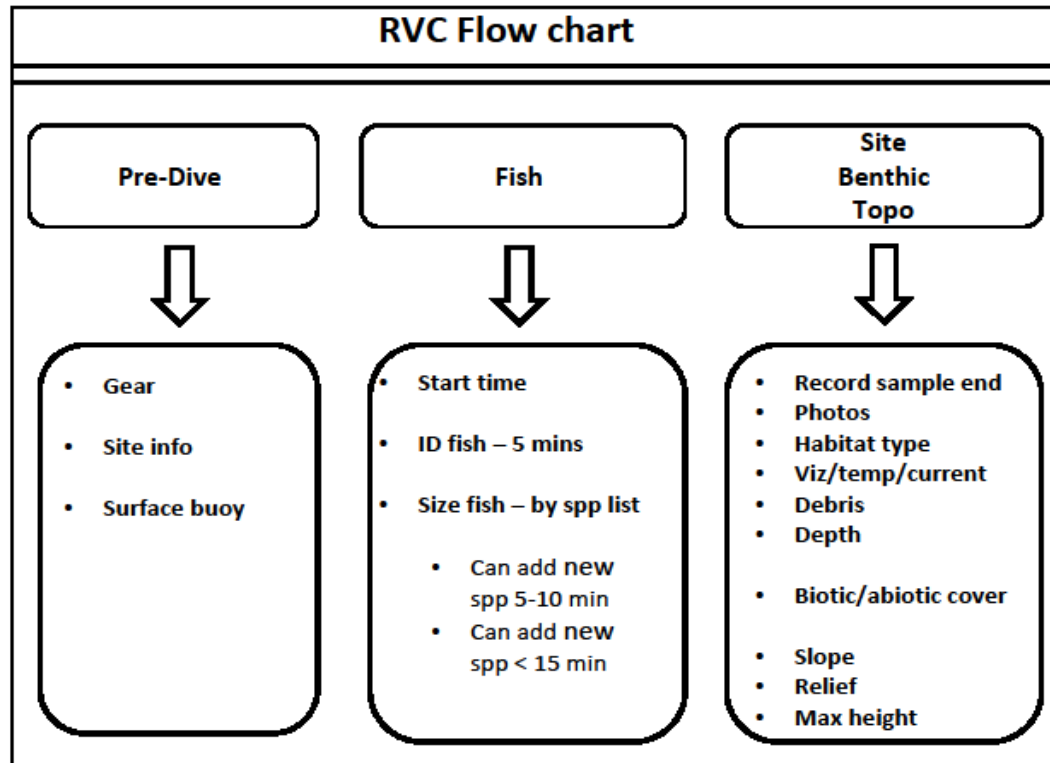


Figure 2. Reef visual census (RVC) sequence of events.

Pre-dive

Station information is to be recorded in two primary locations prior to entering the water: *Boat/Dive log* (Figure 3) and *datasheet* (Figure 4).

Boat Log

Key fields to record for station information include (Figure 3):

1. *Site* – The 4-digit station number.
2. *Station* – The location of each “team” of replicate fish divers at the station.
 - a. Caribbean and FGBNMS is 1-stage and always ‘1’
 - b. Florida is 2-stage where ‘1’ and ‘2’ would be assigned
3. *Team (Team member assignment)* – Letter code identifying the type of survey data being collected by the diver within their dive team.
 - a. Fish (A/B) – A two-diver fish team consists of a Diver A and Diver B.
 - b. Benthic (J/X) – The diver collecting Benthic Assessment data is assigned the code ‘J’; the diver collecting Demographic data is assigned ‘X’.

**** Codes are assigned to diver positions within the team and type of data collected; therefore, diver team codes could change by station as divers potentially rotate****

Date	DOD	Site	Station	Team	Diver	O2%	PSI IN	TIME IN
4/12/16	1	1200	1	A	Clark			
	1	1200	1	B	Blondeau			
	1	1200	1	J	Edwards			
	1	1200	1	X	Viehman			
4/12/16	2	1026	1	A	Nemeth			
	2	1026	1	B	Clark			
	2	1026	1	J	Viehman			
	2	1026	1	X	Blondeau			

Figure 3. Example of boat log with specific station information filled out. DOD = Dive of the day.

Example: Figure 3 provides an example of a boat log and the specific station information to record at the dive site. The first dive of the day consisted of four divers, one fish team and one benthic team. The fish divers are Clark and Blondeau, identified by the A/B codes. For the first dive, Clark is team member A and Blondeau is team member B. For the second dive of the day, Nemeth is team member A and Clark is team member B as the divers rotated.

Datasheet

Divers should pre-populate station information, same as recorded on the boat log, on their datasheet prior to entering the water.

1. *Logistic and station information* – Names of all divers, Field ID, date, time of survey, mission data manager and meters completed (Figure 4; Appendix III). Fill in all categories legibly.
 - a. **Field ID** – The **Field ID** is a unique alpha-numeric number the diver is to record on the datasheet at each station.

$$\text{FIELD ID} = (\text{SITE \#}) + (\text{STATION \#}) + (\text{TEAM letter})$$

Example (Figure 4): Diver Clark recorded the **Field ID** 12001A. According to the boat/dive log (Figure 3), Clark is diver A for site 1200 (and 1 used for all Caribbean fish surveys).

- Dive start time is the time divers leave the boat.
- The diver can enter visibility as they will need to determine visibility as they establish the cylinder.

NCRMP RVC Datasheet 2016					
Diver: Clark	Date: 12 April	Field ID: 12001A	Data Manager: Hile		
Buddy: JB	Sample Start Time: _____	Habitat type: _____	Underwater visibility: _____ m		
Dive Start Time: 1100	Sample End Time: _____	Bedrock _____ Patch Reef _____	Water temperature: _____ F		
Dive End Time: _____	Max Dive Depth: _____	Net Deployment _____	Post-Cruise Task _____	Current: None	Mod: Blk

Figure 4. Example of pre-dive datasheet station entries prior to entering the water.

Fish counting/measuring

Once the cylinders have been established the team begins to identify fish.

1. Each diver will identify to species or lowest possible taxon and record on the datasheet, all fish that enter the cylinder for **5 minutes** (Figure 5). This includes the space above the cylinder (Appendix I, Figure B).
2. Not all species loiter around the cylinder and let themselves be counted, therefore diver may record numbers and sizes of those fish that are most likely not going to be in the cylinder both during and after the 5 minute identification phase to assure they are recorded. Highly mobile species such as jacks, sharks or skittish species may zoom in and out of the cylinder while a diver is in the identifying phase of the survey.
3. After 5 minutes, the diver begins to work down the list of identified species on the datasheet and begins to estimate fork length size to the nearest 1 cm. For enumeration and size estimation for most species, one 360-degree rotation is typically made for each species (Figure 4).

For example (Figure 5), fishes are measured by total number (N), average size (AVG), minimum size (Min) and maximum size (Max). For single fish, the number and size are listed. For two fish, the diver can list both sizes, either in the Min and Max columns, or if they are the same size, list the number twice.

TOTAL	100%	100%	TOTAL	100%	100%
Species	N	Avg	Min	Max	Species
STVA	100	3	3	5	
SPBA	1	80			
SPVI	4	20	18	27	
HAFL	13	16	12	19	
SPAU	12	8	6	11	
	3	24	21	26	
COGL	2		4	5	
OCCH	17,15,13,21,14				
MAPL	1	19			

Figure 5. Example of fish observations during RVC survey.

4. After the 5 minute identification phase, new species may be added as the diver is counting and measuring the species identified in the first 5 minutes.
 - a. The diver should draw a line under the initial 5 minute list and add the fish below that line.
 - b. The diver can add new species for 5 more minutes and draw another line under the second grouping of species.

- c. If the fish survey is continuing into 15 minutes, new species can be added in a third grouping (Figure 6).

Species	N	Avg	Min	Max	Species	N	Avg	Min	Max
HAFI	21	17	11	20					
LATR	1	29							
STLE	3	5	4	7					
EPGU	21, 24, 19								
CARU	1	27							
LUJO	1	22							
CALA	1	31							

Figure 6. Example of adding new fish species after the 5 and 10 minute segments.

5. Some species, parrotfish in particular, have individuals that have bimodal size groups. If the diver is comfortable with estimating both groups individually then it is recommended that they do so.
 - a. This provides a greater resolution of the community structure of these species. For example in Figure 5, the species code SPAU (*Sparisoma aurofrenatum*, redband parrotfish) commonly has groups of juveniles and adults intermixed.
 - b. If the diver is not experienced or comfortable with this technique then one range of sizes is sufficient.
6. Important commercial and/or recreational species such as groupers and snappers should be individually sized up to a group total of 10 individuals (Table 1). If there are more than 10 in the group, the remainder should be estimated with minimum, maximum, and average sizes individually. These species are:

Table 1. List of commercial and/or recreational species for individual sizing.

Species Name	Common Name	Species Name	Common Name
<i>Cephalopholis cruentata</i>	graysby	<i>Lutjanus jocu</i>	dog snapper
<i>Cephalopholis fulva</i>	coney	<i>Lutjanus mahogoni</i>	mahogany snapper
<i>Dermatolepis inermis</i>	marbled grouper	<i>Lutjanus synagris</i>	lane snapper
<i>Epinephelus adscensionis</i>	rock hind	<i>Mycteroperca bonaci</i>	black grouper
<i>Epinephelus guttatus</i>	red hind	<i>Mycteroperca interstitialis</i>	yellowmouth grouper
<i>Epinephelus morio</i>	red grouper	<i>Mycteroperca tigris</i>	tiger grouper
<i>Epinephelus striatus</i>	Nassau grouper	<i>Mycteroperca venenosa</i>	yellowfin grouper
<i>Lutjanus analis</i>	mutton snapper	<i>Mycteroperca phenax</i>	scamp
<i>Lutjanus apodus</i>	schoolmaster	<i>Ocyurus chrysurus</i>	yellowtail snapper
<i>Lutjanus buccanella</i>	blackfin snapper	<i>Lachnolaimus maximus</i>	hogfish
<i>Lutjanus cyanopterus</i>	cupera snapper	<i>Pterois volitans</i>	red lionfish
<i>Lutjanus griseus</i>	gray snapper		

****The point count is over when all fish have been identified, counted and sized.****

Site/Benthic/Topographic assessment

Following the fish survey, site information is collected and recorded on the Fish/Habitat data sheet (Figure 7). The following variables are measured and recorded:

1. Habitat type: chosen from the following categories (circle one on the Fish/Habitat datasheet). At the surface, the diver should discuss with their buddy and other team members and try to come to a consensus. If a consensus is not achieved divers should note that in the Field/Boat Log. **NOTE: habitat types are different in the U.S. Caribbean and Flower Garden Banks (Appendix IV).**
2. Water temperature and currents: temperature and visibility at the bottom; water current estimated by divers for each paired survey; categories as follows: None (none), Mod. (diver is able to stay in same position with a gentle kick), High (diver struggles to stay in same position).
3. Substrate Slope: the maximum and minimum depths within the sample cylinder. These values refer to the maximum and minimum depths on the imaginary plane underlying the sample cylinder. If there is a slope these depths will be different (Appendix V).
4. Max Vertical Relief: the maximum vertical relief within the sample cylinder of both hard (e.g., coral structure, coralline spur, rocky outcrop) and soft (e.g., octocorals, sponges and macroalgae) substrate. These values should not be zero.
5. Surface Relief Coverage: for hard vertical relief (e.g., coral structure, coralline spur, rocky outcrop): the estimated percentages of hard/soft relief that fall into the following categories (all values in meters): < 0.2, 0.2-0.5, .05-1.0, 1.0-1.5, and >1.5. These values should sum to 100%.
6. Surface Relief Coverage for soft vertical relief (e.g., octocorals, sponges and algae): the category (< 0.2, 0.2-0.5, .05-1.0, 1.0-1.5, and >1.5m) representing the average vertical relief of all soft relief should be indicated by writing “100%” by that category.
7. Abiotic Footprint: the percentage of the cylinder comprised of sand, hardbottom and rubble. These percentages should sum to 100%.
 - a. Sand is defined as coarse biogenic or oolitic sand (grain sizes typically between 0.5-2 mm) and finer silt sized particles (< 0.2 mm).
 - i. Sand is considered the substratum when sediment depth is usually 2-3 cm in depth or greater.
 - ii. It excludes a surface “dusting” of sediment particles overlying a consolidated substratum.
 - b. Rubble ranges from coarse gravel (> 5 mm) to unconsolidated and moveable rocks (e.g. dislodged and moveable coral fragments). This category differs from consolidated hardbottom because of its loose and moveable nature.
 - c. Consolidated hardbottom includes solid, consolidated lithogenic or biogenic substratum, including living and dead coral, and non-coral hard-bottom. Areas covered by seagrass should be coded as sand, since the biotic “grass” is growing in the abiotic sand substrate.

8. Biotic Cover

- SAND:** the percentage of the sand substrate that corresponds to the following categories: bare, under/supporting growth of macroalgae, under/supporting growth of seagrass, under / supporting growth of sponges, and other. These values should sum to 100%. See preceding section for sand definition.
- HARDBOTTOM:** While looking at an aerial, canopy view of the cylinder, the percentage of the hardbottom substrate covered with algae < 1 cm height (e.g., turf algae, *Lobophora*), macroalgae > 1 cm height (e.g., *Halimeda*, *Dictyota*), live coral, octocoral, sponge, and other abundant benthic taxonomic groups. These values should sum to 100%.
- Submerged debris:** indicate if live fishing traps, trap debris, fishing gear (line, etc) or other man-made debris.

NCRMP RVC Datasheet 2018									
Diver: RC		Date: 4/4/11		Field ID: 10001A		Data Manager: Hile			
Buddy: JB		Sample Start Time: 1005		Habitat type:		Underwater visibility: 8 m			
Dive Start Time: 1000		Sample End Time: 1020		Bedrock		Patch Reef		Water temperature: 90 F	
Dive End Time: 1030		Max Dive Depth: 49 ft		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Pavement		<input type="checkbox"/> Soft, Coral/Rock		Current: None Mod. High	
Substrate Slope		Station Depth: 48 ft		Aggregate Reef		In Sand			
Max depth: 49 ft		Submerged Debris:		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/> LiveTrap <input type="checkbox"/> TrapDebris <input type="checkbox"/> Fishing <input type="checkbox"/> Other					
Min depth: 49 ft		Biotic Cover - Dominant Biological Cover %							
Max vertical Relief		SAND				HARDBOTTOM			
Hard Relief: 0.5 m		"Bare" 97				Algae (<1cm) 03			
Soft Relief: 0.4 m		Macro Algae 1				Algae (>1cm) 15			
Surface Relief Coverage %		Sea grass 2				Live Stony Coral 5			
Hard		Sponge 2				Octocoral 4			
Soft		Other 1				Seagrass 5			
< 0.2 m 90 %		Other 1				Other 1 SCA 10			
0.2-0.5 m 10 %						Other 1			
0.5-1.0 m									
1.0-1.5 m									
> 1.5 m									
TOTAL 100%		TOTAL 100%				TOTAL 100%			
Species		N		Avg		Min		Max	

Figure 7. Example of site information, benthic cover and topographic information gathered during an RVC survey in the U.S. Caribbean (note the habitat types).

Site Photographs

The Benthic Assessment diver photographs the site survey area. Photos will include the specific transect survey area for general site characterization. Additional photos may include divers conducting surveys, unique features, and for species identification purposes.

- Station Documentation: at least five photographs per station
 - Take one photograph of station and logistic information at the top of the datasheet prior to taking any photographs of the site. The station name, date, time and heading information should be clear and legible in the photograph.
 - Take four site photographs at the four cardinal compass headings (i.e. 0°, 90°, 180° and 270°).
 - Additional photographs may be taken of anything unusual (e.g., rare fish, bleached or rare corals), for species identification purposes, unique site features, and other divers.
- For the process for downloading and storing site photographs, refer to *Photo Documentation Manual*.

Field Equipment

- SCUBA gear
- Fish survey datasheet, clipboard, pencil (& backup pencil)
- All Purpose Tool (APT; Figure 1)
- Camera/housing

Data sheet review

At end of survey, when divers are on boat, the dive team exchanges datasheets for review by checking for completeness and legibility. A diver cannot review his/her own datasheet.

1. *RVC fish datasheet* – Review includes, at a minimum, verifying the following:
 - a. Completeness and legibility of all site information prior to dive.
 - b. Completeness and legibility of all species, counts and size numbers.
 - c. Completeness and legibility of Topographic Complexity records
 - d. Concur on habitat type
 - e. Discuss any strange, unique, weird (first time you have ever seen it) type of species as this can help with species ID errors.

Appendix I. Illustrations of survey placement and cylinders

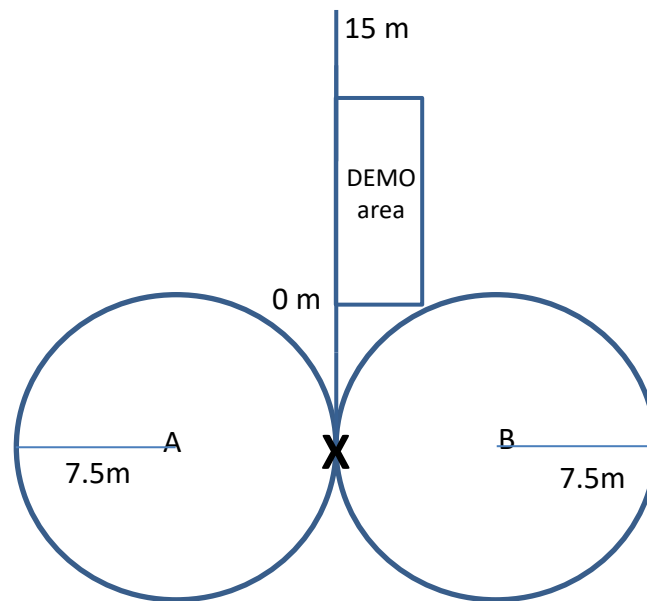


Figure A. Suggested placement of fish and benthic survey areas combined if continuous hardbottom. A and B represent two fish divers.

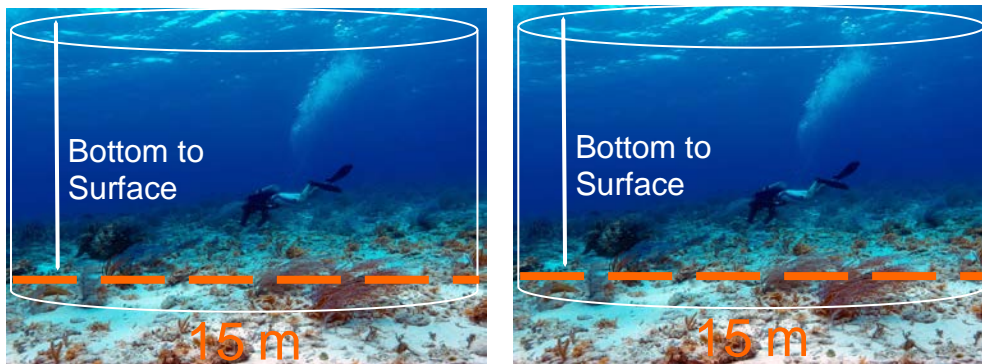


Figure B. Photos indicating optimal cylinder placement. The dive teams surface buoy will be tied to the bottom in between both cylinders. Benthic team may start transect in the vicinity of the fish teams surface buoy.

Appendix IV. Habitat Types

U.S. Caribbean habitat types¹

Aggregate reef: Continuous, high-relief coral formation of variable shapes. Examples of aggregate reefs include fore reef, fringing reef, shelf edge reef, spur and groove reef)

Bedrock: Exposed bedrock contiguous with the shoreline. May be colonized (dense coverage of macroalgae, hard coral, gorgonians, and other sessile invertebrates) or uncolonized (often covered by a thin sand veneer with sparse coverage of biota (macroalgae, hard coral, etc.).

Patch reef: Coral formations that are isolated from other coral reef formations by sand, seagrass or other habitats. Can be an individual patch reef or aggregate patch reefs.

Individual Patch Reef

Usually circular or oblong. High relief. Isolated by other formations by sand, seagrass. At the scale of the transect, may look like aggregate reef or even pavement.

Aggregate Patch Reef

Circular or oblong features not big enough to map individually. The cluster of hardbottom is >10% of the entire polygon. Where there is a halo, the halo is part of the polygon.

Pavement: Flat, low-relief, solid carbonate rock. May be colonized (dense coverage of macroalgae, hard coral, gorgonians, and other sessile invertebrates) or uncolonized (often covered by a thin sand veneer with sparse coverage of biota (macroalgae, hard coral, etc.).

Scattered coral/rock in sand: Primarily sand or seagrass bottom with scattered rocks or small, isolated coral heads that are too small to be delineated individually (i.e., smaller than individual patch reef).

Gulf of Mexico (Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary) habitat types

High relief: The coral reef zone that typically consists of rugose boulder or reef building coral species.

Low relief: The coral reef zone that refers to the deeper (generally between 30-52 m), less rugose and non-reef building species.

¹ Adapted from:

Kendall, M.S., C.R. Kruer, K.R. Buja, J.D. Christensen, M. Finkbeiner, R.A. Warner, and M.E. Monaco. 2001. Methods Used to Map the Benthic Habitats of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. NOAA Technical Memorandum NOS NCCOS CCMA 152. Silver Spring, MD. 46 pp.

Appendix IV. Slope and depth illustrations

Illustration of substrate slope and depth measurements.

