

## **Coral Camp for Kids sponsored by Reef Relief**

### **Rudy S Bonn**

Coral Camp for Kids is a program designed for six to twelve year old elementary school students where they learn the fundamentals of coral reef ecosystem ecology. Sponsored by Reef Relief, Coral Camp is held every summer beginning in June and running through August, and is composed of week-long sessions that begin at 830 in the morning and end at approximately 430pm.

One of new activities for this year's Coral Camp was giving the kids a chance to look at microscopic organisms, sand grains from all over the world, and members of the plankton community as a result of the generous grant awarded to Reef Relief by the Center for Microbial Oceanography: Research and Education (C-MORE).

Microbes play an enormous role in the marine environment and the kids were amazed that it is estimated, from the recently completed Census of Marine Life, that the total biomass of microbes in the world ocean is equal in weight to every individual on Earth weighing the same amount as 35 elephants! I even had them do the math, lets see, the average elephant we estimated weighs 5000 pounds multiplied by 35 gives you a weight of 175,000 pounds and then multiply that by 7 billion! Believe me, they could not even fathom such a number and were simply amazed.

We looked at microscopic moon jellies because they were so abundant in the water this year and we thought we might be able to collect some. So, the kids and I, using a plankton net were pleasantly surprised when the collection contained so many different kinds of organisms. The moon jellies were especially noted because the day before we all got stung by them as we were snorkeling on the reef due to their sheer abundance—you could not avoid them! Seeing the microscopic medusa was a real treat for the kids!

We also collected copepods and diatoms and these were all looked at which lead into discussions about marine food webs, trophic levels, predator/prey interactions, and so forth. The microscope proved to be an invaluable tool that will be used every year during Coral Camp thanks to the grant from C-MORE.

The sand grains allowed us to discuss with the kids the idea of low energy environments vs. high energy environments. Just by looking at the shape and the edges of the sand grains through the microscope the kids were eventually able to tell us what kind of beach environment the sand grains originated from. This also led to other discussions regarding physical oceanography; tides, currents, waves, etc.

So, as you can see, the addition of one piece of equipment has the ability to open up new windows of opportunity in the education of young minds, and older ones too for that matter. Many of us counselors were also quite amazed at the organisms we were able to observe using the scope. It is an essential educational tool and we at Reef Relief cannot thank you enough!