

Coral Reef Ecology - Belize

COURSE INFORMATION & SYLLABUS

May 18 – June 25, 2026

[please read this syllabus carefully, and refer to it throughout the course]

2026 Program Dates:

- **May 18 – June 5:** ONLINE course materials in coral reef ecology (4-credit track only)
- **June 6 – 9:** Online course wrap-up; prepare for departure!
- **June 10 – 25:** FIELD expedition to Belize!

Online content will be delivered on Canvas and via Group Meetings on Zoom.

Canvas course page: <https://canvas.instructure.com/courses/12069973>

See detailed schedule attached for course content each week

All students (4-credit and 2-credit tracks) are required to participate in all three synchronous meetings

Zoom link (recurring): Meeting ID: 830 5275 2963 Passcode: CoralReefs ([zoom link](#))

Meeting attendance is required, so please clear your schedule ahead of time. Inform your instructor of any conflicts immediately. Scheduled synchronous meetings:

Group Meeting 1: 5/18 @ noon – 2:00 pm CST – Introductions & Orientation to Belize

Group Meeting 2: 5/27 @ noon – 2:00 pm – Project Ideas Discussion

Group Meeting 3: 6/5 @ 3:00 – 5:00 pm – Project Proposal Presentations

Instructors:

- Teal Guetschow (Instructor & Coordinator): tguetschow@ceiba.org, WhatsApp +1 920 946-9813
- Catherine Woodward, PhD: cwoodward@ceiba.org, WhatsApp +1 608 215-9105

Program Overview:

Coral Reef Ecology blends adventure and education in the study of the most diverse marine ecosystems on Earth. Coral reefs are our focus, but no study of corals would be complete without investigating their crucial partnerships with mangroves, seagrasses, and the open ocean environment. **There are two tracks for this course**, depending on whether you have taken the Botany 265: Rainforests and Coral Reefs FIG at UW-Madison the previous fall semester.

- **4-CREDIT TRACK: 3-week Online Course + 2-week Field Expedition in Belize**

*Students on the 4-credit track receive **three weeks of intensive online learning** to gain a solid background in principles of oceanography, coral reef ecology, and marine conservation prior to the expedition to*

Belize. You will collaborate with your peers before you travel and develop a research proposal for a scientific study that you'll carry out once at the Glover's Reef marine research station.

- **2-CREDIT TRACK: 3 Online Preparatory Meetings + 2-week Field Expedition in Belize**
Open only to students enrolled in Botany 265 during the prior semester.

Two-credit vs. Four-credit Tracks:

Coral Reef Ecology offers a 2- or 4-credit track, depending on prior participation in Dr. Woodward's Botany 265 Rainforests and Coral Reefs FIG at the University of Wisconsin (UW). UW adopts the Carnegie standard of 45 hours of learning activities per credit. You can expect to spend 30-35 hours during the online portion, and the remainder (and then some!) in Belize.

I. Online Portion (4-credit track students only):

Content will be accessed through the Canvas platform. Expect a fast-paced immersion in coral reef ecology, committing 10-12 hours per week on the online content, plus collaboration with your peers to develop a research proposal. **The online content will include one weekly synchronous session** involving students enrolled in both tracks, but otherwise will be asynchronous, and include video lectures, discussion forums, and online collaboration tools focused on the fundamentals of oceanography and the ecology of mangrove, coral reef, and seagrass ecosystems. Students in the 4-credit will also design their research projects during this time period.

Synchronous Meetings: All students are expected to participate in three synchronous Group Meetings (all accessed by the Zoom link on page 1). The first is an orientation to the course, the second is to discuss your research project ideas, and the last is for you to present your research proposals. The schedule for the Group Meetings is shown above.

Asynchronous Content: Content each week will feature several online learning modules on coral reef biology, as well as readings. They can be viewed on a laptop or tablet; viewing on your phone is not recommended. You are expected to view the lectures for each week in sequence, and in time to take the summative online quiz, available over the last three days of each week.

Discussions and Assignments: During the online portion of the course we will have 2-4 asynchronous online discussion forums. Most of these are geared to helping you develop your research question. You will be prompted with questions and asked to respond with your perspectives and insights. The course instructors serve as moderators and facilitators of online discussions. There also will be a couple of short in-class assignments, as well as field activities conducted during the field portion of the course. These activities will be completed individually or in small groups.

Group Research Projects: Everyone will carry out a research project in a small group (2-4 students per group). The purpose of this project is to provide you the opportunity to gain experience in developing and conducting a marine research study and to develop skills using the scientific method.

During the online portion of the course you will develop ideas and formulate a central question (along with several backup options) and a hypothesis for each that you would test during our time in Belize. Once in Belize, you will practice and refine proposed data collection methods, collect data in the field, analyze the data, and write up your findings in a scientific paper format as well as in an oral presentation (in scientific conference presentation format). Everyone is expected to contribute

equally to each component of the research project to the best of their ability. Detailed instructions and a rubric will be provided to guide group research projects.

Quizzes: There will be three online quizzes, available for the last three days of each week. The quizzes are designed to ensure you have learned the basic concepts from the lectures and readings, which will be built upon during the field portion of the course. **The third quiz is cumulative.** You will have two attempts to take each quiz, however your final grade is the average of your two attempts, so it is in your best interest to do as well as you can on the first attempt ... study for it! There are also a few ungraded self-tests so you can assess your progress on the learning objectives. Note, there will be a field quiz near the end of the first week of the field expedition to assess your ability to identify common organisms in the marine environment. For more details on how you'll be assessed in this course, see the sections on Participation and Grading below.

II: Online Preparation for 2-Credit Track Students (FIG only):

The 2-credit track provides FIG students the opportunity to carry out their research project in Belize alongside students in the 4-credit track who will have just completed the online course.

Students in the 2-credit track are required to participate in the three synchronous Group Meetings via Zoom (see page 1). These meetings are important for the preparation of all students to travel to Belize. The first meeting is a pre-departure orientation and provides the opportunity for students in both tracks to get to know one another. The second and third meetings are focused on helping students prepare for their research project in Belize, including FIG students who will revisit and refine the research proposals they developed several months prior. These meetings will ensure that all students are similarly prepared and “on the same page” upon arrival in Belize.

III. Field Expedition (4-credit and 2-credit students):

The field component will take place at the Glover's Reef Research Station in the Glover's Reef Marine Reserve and mainland sites. Here, we will enjoy full days in the field to reinforce what was learned during the online course (or in Botany 265 for 2-credit students), in a hands-on environment. Upon arrival, we will take a bus to Dangriga where we will spend the night before getting on a boat in the morning to Glover's Reef Atoll. Here, we will gain experience in marine field research through structured field activities to practice and refine proposed research methods. Over the next week, you will refine and carry out your proposed group research project, obtaining guidance and feedback from course instructors and participating in nightly group reflections. During the final few days, you will analyze the data, write up your findings, and prepare an oral presentation to present to the class. Daily fieldwork will be complemented by group discussions and presentations on marine conservation. For the last 3 days of our time in Belize, we will stay at Jaguar Creek Lodge to experience the mainland culture and the surrounding rainforest.

What to Expect in Belize:

The field expedition begins when you arrive at Belize City's Goldson International Airport. From here, we head to 2 hours south by bus to Dangriga, where we spend the night prior to traveling to Glover's Reef the following morning. A motorboat will take us 40 miles offshore (about 1.5 hours) over the Belizean Barrier Reef to Glover's Reef Atoll. Here, you will be housed in shared dormitories at the Glover's Reef Research Station located on Middle Caye, which also serves as an outpost of the Belizean coast guard. From the station, you can explore coral reefs and seagrass beds straight from the beach, and you will also have access to sites farther away by boat. Our time at Glover's Reef will focus on identifying common marine organisms, observing coral reef ecology concepts you will have learned in class, and

implementing your research projects. We will also go on group snorkeling excursions to special sites within the marine reserve, have group discussions, and partake in evening reflection and relaxation. For the last three days of the field expedition, we return to the Belizean mainland. Our home will be Jaguar Creek Lodge, where we have the opportunity to explore a tropical rainforest to observe monkeys, birds, and other wildlife, visit a Mayan archeological site, and go cave tubing! It is here that you will also work on the finishing touches of your final research presentations and papers. At both Jaguar Creek and Glover’s Reef Research Station, you will be served three delicious Belizean meals a day. On our last full day, you will deliver an oral presentation on the results of your research, and we will have a final farewell dinner. The next morning, we will take a bus to the airport and say our goodbyes.

Textbook and Readings (4-credit track only):

- Sheppard, 2021. *Coral Reefs: A Very Short Introduction (2nd edition)* Oxford University Press; ISBN 0198869827) – get it on [Amazon](#)
- Other required readings are assigned in the weekly modules

What to Bring to Belize:

You are required to bring a mask, snorkel and fins for the field component of the course in Belize. It is **very important** that students test their mask and fins **before** arriving in Belize to make sure that they fit properly, as we will be using these tools daily for our field activities. Each student is also required to keep a field journal ([we recommend a waterproof one, like this](#)) in which to record observations, data, and reflections. A complete list of required and recommended gear is available on Canvas.

Participation and Grading:

If you are an active participant in this class, you are very likely to earn a good grade! Participation is more than your mere presence during online and field activities. For students in the online course (4-credit track), you will be expected to turn in assignments on time, engage fully with the online content, put time and effort into developing a research project, and contribute to online discussions with thoughtful posts. All students (4-credit and 2-credit tracks) are expected to attend and participate in the synchronous online meetings. During the field component, you will be evaluated based on your engagement in individual and group activities, being on time, actively participating in the fieldwork for your research project, and contributing to the success of the course. Your grade will *not* be based on your water-based skills, rather the effort that is put into each activity according to your individual abilities and comfort level. Your final grade will be broken down as follows:

Grade Item	% of total grade
4-Credit Track (Online + Field)	
Assignments (including asynchronous discussions)	5%
Online quizzes	10%
Field quiz	10%
Research project	60%
Research Proposal	15%
Research Project Participation (incl. peer evals)	10%
Presentations (online 5% and final 5%)	10%
Final paper	15%
Field journal	5%

Class Participation (online & field)	10%
TOTAL	100%
2-Credit Track (Field + Preparatory meetings)	
Research project	75%
Research Project Participation (incl. peer evals)	20%
Presentations (online 5% and final 10%)	20%
Final paper	35%
Field quiz	10%
Field journal	5%
Class Participation (online + field)	10%
TOTAL	100%

Grades will be assigned according to the following grading scale: 92-100% = A; 88-91.9% = AB; 82-87.9% = B; 78-81.9% = BC; 70-77.9 = C; 60-70% = D; <60% = F

Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this program you will be able to:

- Describe the basic physical and chemical properties of seawater.
- Describe the geomorphology of oceans and how conditions change with depth.
- Explain the causes of waves, tides, and global ocean circulation patterns.
- Understand how abiotic conditions in the oceans influence the biotic communities within them.
- Identify major animal taxa in coastal tropical marine communities, including mangroves, sea grass beds, and coral reefs.
- Describe the ecological characteristics of coastal tropical marine ecosystems and explain the biotic adaptations to them.
- Explain the major threats facing each major marine system, and what everyone can do to combat them.
- Apply ecological concepts in marine science to the design of marine protected areas.
- Develop a hypothesis informed by scientific literature, and write a research proposal to investigate it.
- Apply common marine sampling and research techniques to collect data in a marine environment.
- Analyze and present scientific data orally and in writing.
- Articulate major threats to ocean ecosystems and actions that can be taken to mitigate them.

Statement on Diversity & Inclusion:

Ceiba values all forms of human and natural diversity, and believe it is a source of creativity, resilience, and strength. With conservation projects in different countries, we at Ceiba understand that it is not possible to fully understand everyone's lived experiences from our own perspectives. We believe the key is to be open to learn about other peoples' experiences, and by doing so enrich both our own and others' lives. We strive to create welcoming, supportive, and inclusive learning environments in our programs, and we ask for participants' help with that. We expect everyone to be respectful, attentive, inclusive, and tolerant of others so together we create a productive learning community. Below is the DEI statement from UW-Madison.

Academic Integrity:

This course is accredited by the UW-Madison, and Ceiba adopts the same standards for academic integrity. By enrolling in this course, you assume the responsibilities of an active participant in UW-Madison's community of scholars in which everyone's academic work and behavior are held to the

highest academic integrity standards. Academic misconduct compromises the integrity of the university and of your own intellectual development. Cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, and helping others commit these acts are examples of academic misconduct, which will result in disciplinary action. This includes but is not limited to failure on the assignment/course, disciplinary probation, or suspension. Substantial or repeated cases of misconduct will be forwarded to the Dean of Students Office for additional review. For more information, refer to:

<https://conduct.students.wisc.edu/academic-misconduct/>

Program Links:

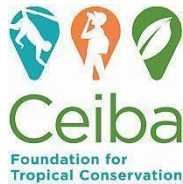
[Program page on Ceiba Foundation for Tropical Conservation website](#)

[Program page on UW IAP website](#)

[Glover's Reef Marine Reserve and Research Station site](#)

[Belize Tourism Board travel information](#)

[U.S. State Department Travel Information for Belize](#)



CORAL REEF ECOLOGY
4-Credit Track: Online + Field
Online Content Schedule*
May 18 – June 9, 2026

Week	Topics	Readings/Activities**
Week 1		
May 18 - 24	Group Meeting 1: Mon. 5/18 @ noon-2PM	Topic: Orientation to the course and Belize trip
	Introduction to Coral Reefs	Forum 1: Introduce Yourself! Read: Sheppard, Ch. 1-4; Claudino-Sales 2018
	The Ocean Environment	Assignment 1: Belizean Reef Creatures Forum 2: Post your Research Ideas
	Life on the Coral Reef: Foundation species	QUIZ 1 Available 5/22 – 5/24
Week 2		
May 25 - 31	Group Meeting 2: Wed. 5/27 @ noon-2PM	Topic: Discuss Research ideas
	Life on the Coral Reef: Ecological Interactions	Read: Sheppard, Ch. 5-6; Lamb 2017; Cox et al. 2020 Forum 2: Reply to research idea posts
	Marine Invertebrates	Assignment 2: Bibliography
	Mangroves & Seagrasses	QUIZ 2 Available 5/29 – 5/31
Week 3		
June 1 - 5	Reef Fishes	Research methods meetings
	Threats to Coral Reefs	Read: Sheppard, Ch 7-9; MacClanahan & Muthinga 2020
	Conservation of Coral Reefs	Proposal draft DUE Fri. 7/12
	Future of the Seas	QUIZ 3 Available 6/5 – 6/7
	Group Meeting 3: Fri. 6/5 @ 3-5 pm	Topic: Proposal presentations
Week 4		
June 8 - 9	<i>Online course wrap-up, and trip preparation. Receive feedback on proposals and presentations. Purchase research supplies. Pack and prepare for departure. Optional Q&A via Zoom with program staff.</i>	

* Content is subject to change. A final syllabus with complete content information will be given to you at the start of the course.

** Assignments and Forum posts are due by 10 pm on the due date unless otherwise indicated.



Ceiba Foundation for Tropical Conservation
Coral Reef Ecology 2026
Tentative Schedule

Online Classes (3 weeks): Monday, May 18 - Friday, June 5

Date	Day	Location	Activities
10-Jun	Wed		AM - Arrival at Belize Airport; meet staff; transfer(s) to Pelican Beach PM - Presentation about Belize -- find a guest speaker! (Oceana?) PM - Discuss expectations, community agreement, schedule, challenges EVE - Dinner
11-Jun	Thu		AM - Boat transfer to Glover's Reef PM - Orientation, Introductory snorkel ('3 most common fish') PM2 - Review reef fish
12-Jun	Fri		AM - Snorkeling w/ Boat - The Cut; teach fish ID AM - Snorkeling - fish timed surveys seagrass vs. patch reef AM - Damselfish - count attacks? (but hard to ID species!) PM - Snorkel to learn inverts ('10 common inverts') PM - Review invertebrates
13-Jun	Sat		AM - Snorkeling w/ Boat - coral/algae/other transects PM - Tidepool walk (if low tide) PM - Teach stats on Coral Transects & Fish Surveys EVE 2 - Glovers Reef Marine Reserve talk - Fisheries (if available) EVE 2 - Night Snorkel (if conditions allow)
14-Jun	Sun		AM - Snorkeling - Fore Reef (as conditions allow) or Patch Reef PM - Project meetings, equipment PM2 - Glovers Reef Marine Reserve talk - Fisheries (if available) EVE - Review Fishes & Inverts again
15-Jun	Mon		AM - QUIZ PM - DAY OFF
16-Jun	Tue		All Day - Projects Day 1 (boat to sites) Extra activity: Intertidal walk (*when tide is low; did it 7/27 AM in 2023)
17-Jun	Wed		All Day - Projects Day 2 (boat to sites) EVE - Reflections / Discussion - Topic TBA
18-Jun	Thu		All Day - Projects Day 3 (boat to sites) Extra activity: Night snorkel
19-Jun	Fri		All Day - Projects Day 4 (boat to sites) PM - Beach cleanup EVE - Night snorkel (*do earlier if seas are calm; groups of 5 + leader)
20-Jun	Sat		AM - Project wrap-up & Data analysis PM - Marisol Resort; scuba diving, paddleboard, games, sunset
21-Jun	Sun		AM - Boat to Dangriga AM - Visit Smithsonian Reef Restoration @ Carrie Bow Caye PM - Travel to Jaguar Creek Ecolodge
22-Jun	Mon		AM - Rainforest Hike PM - Cave Tubing on No'Hoch River PM - Work on Presentations EVE - Guest presentation on Maya & Belize cultures
23-Jun	Tue		AM - Visit Xunantunich Maya site PM - Work on Presentations
24-Jun	Wed		AM - Belize Zoo PM - Presentations EVE - Garifuna Band / or reflections on Belize Culture EVE - Final dinner
25-Jun	Thu		AM - Transfers to airport - Departures ☹️
2-Jul	Thu		DUE: Final Papers (1 week after course return)