

# REEF'S YOUNGEST HERO



Kailash Cook, 15, has become the youngest Reef Check Ambassador in history.

Picture: KELSIE IORIO

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REEF Check Australia has recently trained its latest Townsville group of Reef Ambassadors during a fun-filled, educational weekend.

One of those ambassadors included 15-year-old Kailash Cook, the youngest Reef Check Ambassador to date.

The Pimlico State High School Year 10 student has been a passionate advocate for protecting the world's most beautiful natural wonderlands, both while living in Thailand and since moving to Australia in 2015.

"I decided to become a Reef Check Ambassador because I've been doing research with Reef Check for many years now," Kailash said.

"Reef Check has always been really inspiring for me, in the way they collect data from all over the world and how they're really good

with community outreach, which I think is probably one of the most important aspects of science.

"What's the point of all this science if it just stays in a lab?"

Kailash said educating the community is the main goal of scientific research.

"When I heard about the Reef Check Ambassador course and how it was helping reef enthusiasts develop that skill in communicating all that science to members of the public, no matter what their background is, it was basically exactly what I needed to develop myself as an ambassador for the reef," he said.

"It's really fun, I'm really enjoying it."

Kailash said his personal goal as an ambassador is to develop a reef education program in high schools.

"It's so important to learn about all the issues that reefs face every single day due to climate change, ocean acidification and run-off from agriculture, and find little things we

can all do to help improve the quality of the reefs," he said.

"It's such a disposable society, and that's one of the things I want to bring awareness to especially in the younger community.

"That's why I want to take this to schools, because these people are going to grow up and have to deal with these problems so it's best they know what they can do now.

"I just want to give kids my age at least some of the experiences that I've had on the reef."

Kailash's reef experiences would rival most adults, gaining dive qualifications at the age of 10 and spending days out on the reef with his father, a certified dive instructor, while living in Thailand.

"I used to go out on the dive boat and do a lot of snorkelling. I was watching the reef from a young age," Kailash said.

"I saw lots of things that made me really passionate about the reef."

Kailash and his family moved to

Australia to start mainstream schooling after being homeschooled for primary school, a transition he said was a good one.

"I do miss going out and diving on the reefs, but I'm at the Great Barrier Reef which is where I wanted to be for a very long time, so I'm not going to complain," he said.

"I have so many more opportunities here as well with Reef Check and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, I might be restricted by age at the moment but that's only for a limited time.

"I've wanted to go to JCU for a long time as well, and this is the perfect place to be for that.

"I'm really happy that my parents moved me to Australia, but I'm also really happy I got to have that raw experience with the reefs."

Kailash said he would be able to take his Reef Check Ambassador skills into any career path looking forward to the future.

"Ever since I started thinking

about university a long time ago, I've wanted to do something in the marine science area," he said.

"I haven't really decided the exact path I want to take, but no matter what I do I reckon I'll have to have these communication skills because it's so important for scientists to have that with the public."

Reef Check Australia's Townsville co-ordinator Gemma Molinaro said new ambassadors will help with community outreach and education, as well as taking the lead on activities and projects to help protect marine environments.

"Our Reef ambassadors are forming the front line in Reef Check Australia's mission to empower people to save our reefs and oceans," she said.

"While it's incredibly important to let Townsville residents know the serious threats our reefs are facing, we believe it's even more important to ensure they know how they can help save them."