



ENGAGING, EMPOWERING & SUPPORTING YOUTH IN CORAL REEF CONSERVATION

Towards a Healthy, Productive & Resilient Future #ForCoral

Reflections developed by ICRI's Youth Working Group at the Occasion of the 37th General Meeting

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ICRI
INTERNATIONAL
CORAL REEF INITIATIVE

Engaging, Empowering & Supporting Youth in Coral
Reef Conservation: Towards a Healthy, Productive and
Resilient Future #ForCoral

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI) recognises the importance of incorporating youth perspectives into conservation efforts, as outlined in the 2021 – 2024 Plan of Action: Turning the Tide for Coral Reefs. This commitment is specifically emphasised under Theme 4 which seeks to expand the coral reef community by fostering diversity and inclusion. As we face the burden of multiple drivers of loss such as climate change and other threats to coral reefs, related ecosystems, and their services, the involvement of youth is crucial due to their unique perspectives, fresh ideas, and potential to drive innovative solutions. Within the context of the ICRI Plan of Action, Theme 4 seeks to position youth as implementing partners whilst also elevating their efforts in the implementation of national conservation strategies such as NBSAPs, which serve as instruments for advancing the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework targets. Considering over 50% of the world's population are youth, their active participation in decision-making and program implementation is vital to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals.

This document outlines the objectives and outcomes of a youth delegation that were invited to the 37th ICRI General Meeting held in Kailua-Kona; Hawaii from the 19th - 23rd September 2023. It presents reflections on ICRI's future strategies on youth inclusion, for the preservation and conservation of coral reefs and associated ecosystems. Furthermore, it serves as a comprehensive overview of the imperative need to engage youth in conservation efforts to secure a sustainable future for these vital ecosystems.

The youth delegation was led by Diwigdi Valiente (Former Director, Tourism Planning and Development for the Country of Panama) and Esther Maina (Kenyan Youth Biodiversity Network), who formed an informal working group throughout the duration of the ICRI 37th General Meeting. The overall outcomes were accomplished with the collective efforts and the valuable contributions of Alexis Sturm (NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Programme), Haley Williams (Wildlife Conservation Society), Christophe Blazy (UNEP-CAR/RCU - SPAW-RAC), Karin Moejes (CORDIO East Africa), and Risla Ibrahim (Maldives Marine Research Institute), with guidance from Margaux Monfared and Tom Dallison from the ICRI secretariat.

The youth delegation was tasked with:

1. formulating an Informal Working Group throughout the General Meeting;
2. developing solution-based reflections for the needs, concerns, and aspirations of the youth community to ensure the perspectives of young people are well integrated into the conservation, protection, and restoration of coral reefs; and
3. proposing effective communication channels to meaningfully engage youth within ICRI frameworks.



Key needs, concerns, and aspirations of the youth community were identified, emphasising the need for a reliable, source of information with easy access to actions and opportunities with clear strategies for youth inclusion and engagement, mentorship opportunities, access to financial and technical resources, and the meaningful engagement of young people from the onset of projects, plans and policy up to implementation. Concerns included the lack of recognition of informal youth participation, the absence of a defined strategy for integration of the perspectives of young people in coral reef conservation, and misconceptions of inexperience among youth. Aspirations centre on establishing a platform where youth voices are not only valued but hold substantial significance in the process of decision-making and policy shaping.

The document concludes by providing various channels through which ICRI can effectively engage youth, such as establishing a dedicated landing page/section on ICRI's existing website that regularly provides information opportunities for youth engagement on coral reef conservation and maintains a living list of youth-led coral reef related conservation organizations to facilitate partnerships and collaborations with ICRI members. Furthermore, it proposes a structured Youth

Ambassador Program within ICRI to nurture motivated coral reef conservation leaders and the formation of a dedicated Working Group, to ensure youth representation and engagement at ICRI meetings. The report also proposes the provision of necessary support and guidance for the functioning of the youth Working Group to encourage youth involvement in ICRI events, and promoting inclusive, intergenerational dialogues and collaborations. The importance of wider youth diversity participation and a needs-based assessment to guide engagement is also highlighted.

In summary, this document underscores the crucial role of youth as active stakeholders in coral reef conservation, advocating for their meaningful engagement and contributions to ensure a resilient, sustainable, and inclusive future for coral reefs and associated ecosystems.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We express sincere gratitude to ICRI for extending the invitation to participate in the 37th General Meeting, for their guidance and for all of the support accorded by The Government of Sweden, The Principality of Monaco, The United Nations Environment Programme, as well as The U.S. Department of State and NOAA as Co-Chairs of the 37th ICRI General Meeting.



BACKGROUND

Despite covering less than 1% of the ocean floor, coral reefs generate numerous valuable benefits for both the environment and human populations. Coral reefs are hotspots for biodiversity, providing an essential ecological framework that hosts 25% of all marine life in the ocean providing them with habitats, food sources, and breeding grounds in at least one aspect of their lifecycle. Coral reefs also hold immense economic value on a global scale; they support 1 billion people globally and provide goods and services estimated at \$9.9 trillion per year^[1]. Coral reefs do not only benefit coral Nations– non-coral Nations also benefit from the biodiversity, fisheries, shoreline stabilization, and scientific research services that coral reefs provide. They are therefore key to the realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development^[2].

Globally, coral reefs continue to face a multitude of stressors. The global coverage of living coral has declined by 50% since the 1950s whilst at least 63% of coral-reef-associated biodiversity, including fish species, has declined with the loss of coral reef extent^[3]. Moreover, the Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network (GCRMN) presented that between 2009 to 2018, a progressive loss of live coral cover on the world's coral reefs amounting to 14% was recorded^[4]. Securing the future of healthy, resilient, and productive coral reefs, and by extension, securing our own future, requires urgent responses to address the triple planetary crisis: climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. This calls for collective action, collaboration, and inclusive engagement in conservation efforts.

INVOLVEMENT OF YOUTH

Incorporating the voices and perspectives of the youth community (ages 18 – 35) in coral reef conservation and decision making is crucial to ensure the conservation, restoration, and long-term survival of coral reef ecosystems around the world. Engaging young people fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to preserving coral reefs for future generations. Youth bring unique perspectives, fresh ideas during decision-making, and novel approaches to address the challenges facing coral reef ecosystems, challenges that young people will disproportionately suffer the burden of.

RATIONALE

The International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI) seeks to advance the global partnership's mission of preserving coral reefs and related ecosystems through its founding documents the "Call to Action" and "Framework for Action", which are realised by its Plan of Actions, with ICRI currently implementing its 2021-2024 Plan of Action: Turning the Tide for Coral Reefs. Through the Plan of Action, progress towards the goals of halting drivers of loss and reversing the declining of coral reef ecosystems can be evaluated through the review of ICRI-supported activities.

Under Theme 4 of the Plan of Action, ICRI aims to foster diversity and inclusion of the coral reef community by integrating underrepresented voices, including Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, and young people. The 37th General Meeting of ICRI underscored the initiative's commitment to Theme 4, under the chairmanship of the United States of America, convened in Kailua-Kona Hawai'i from 19 – 23 September 2023.

1. Costanza, R., de Groot, R., Sutton, P., van der Ploeg, S., Anderson, S. J., Kubiszewski, I., Farber, S., & Turner, R. K. (2014). Changes in the global value of ecosystem services. *Global Environmental Change*, 26(1), 152–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2014.04.002>

2. The Fourth United Nations Environment Assembly (2019): UNEP/EA.4/Res.13 Sustainable Coral Reefs Management. [\[LINK\]](#)

3. Eddy, T., Lam, V., Reygondeau, G., Cisneros Montemayor, A., Greer, K., Palomares, M., Bruno, J., Ota, Y., & Cheung, W. (2021). Global decline in capacity of coral reefs to provide ecosystem services. *Cell Press*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cell.2021.04.002>

4. Souter, D., Planes, S., Wicquart, J., Logan, M., Obura, D., Staub, F. (eds) (2021). Status of coral reefs of the world: 2020 report. Global Coral Reef Monitoring Network (GCRMN) and International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI). DOI: [10.59387/WOT.01184](https://doi.org/10.59387/WOT.01184)

The meeting provided a platform to integrate underrepresented voices throughout, including ICRI's inaugural Listening Session and Youth Working Group which ensured discussions among key topics, sharing knowledge and experiences, enabling the opinions, views and values of young people and Indigenous Peoples to be embedded in ICRI's actions.

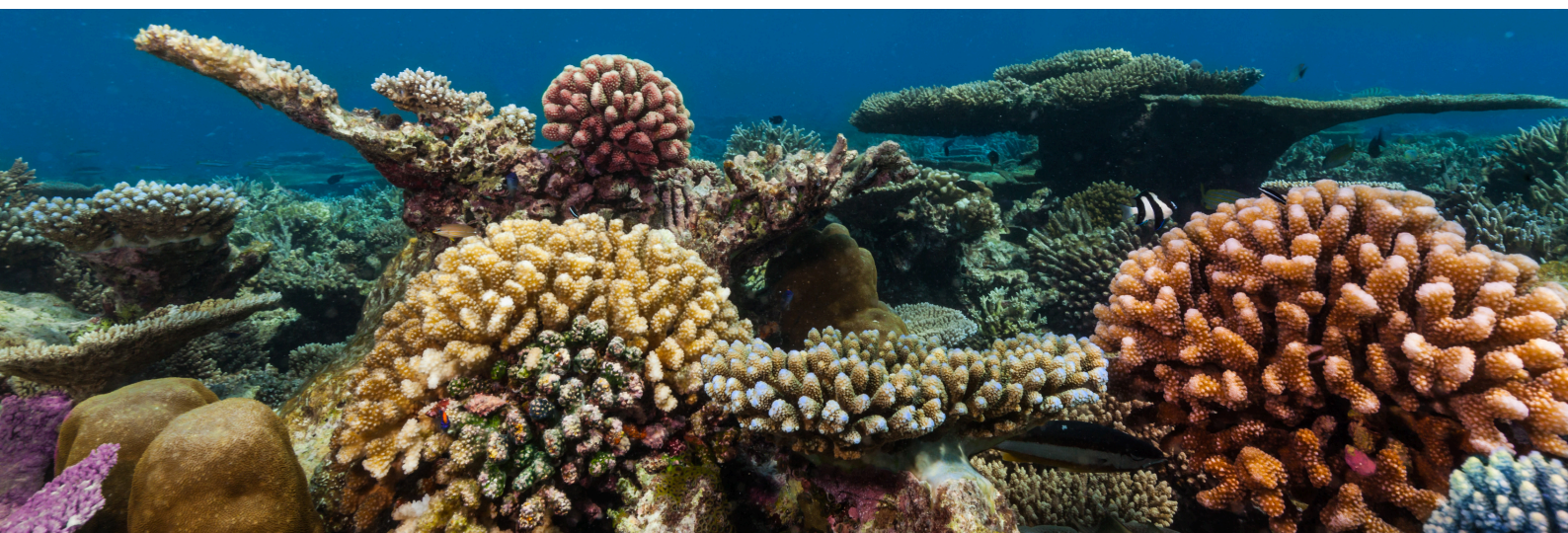
THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTING WITH YOUTH

Theme 4A of the [ICRI Plan of Action](#) is aimed at connecting with youth audiences and is crucial because:

- Youth comprise over 50% of the world's population. Therefore, youth involvement in environmental and development decision-making and in the implementation of programmes is critical to the long-term success of the UN's Agenda 21^[5].
- Approximately 90 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators are deemed to be [youth-related](#) highlighting the vested interest of young people in achieving these Goals. The global community emphasises, under [SDG 14: Life Below Water](#), that, "Young people can provide local knowledge and innovative solutions for the conservation and protection of the world's marine ecosystems and enhance thriving of coastal communities".

- Meaningful youth engagement advances the achievement of sustainable development, peace, security, human rights, intergenerational equity, and gender equality goals.
- The integration of diverse voices, especially from youth, in coral reef conservation efforts, is vital as it brings fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to the challenges facing coral reefs and related ecosystems, and because the younger generations will inherit the consequences of the decisions made in addressing today's challenges.
- The representation from diverse age groups, including youth, helps bolster inclusivity and equitable decision-making within ICRI, laying a strong foundation for fostering Intergenerational Dialogues and collaborations that brings together the wisdom of Indigenous and Local Knowledge, women, and the dynamism and fresh perspective of young people.
- The theme positions youth as implementing partners of the ICRI founding documents, the [Call to Action](#), the [Framework for Action](#), and the [ICRI Plan of Action](#), while also elevating youth efforts in implementation of national conservation strategies such as National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), as implementation instruments for the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) targets^[6].

5. United Nations, General Assembly, 2015b, paragraph 53
6. Convention on Biological Diversity, Fifteenth Conference of Parties (2022) CBD/COP/DEC/15/6: Mechanisms for planning, monitoring, reporting and review. [\[LINK\]](#)



YOUTH DELEGATION AT THE 37TH ICRI GENERAL MEETING

As such, ICRI established its first youth delegation and working group at the occasion of its 37th General Meeting. The group was tasked with the role of developing a solution-based reflection for the needs, concerns, and aspirations of the youth community, to guide ICRI's youth inclusion in future actions and global efforts. These reflections aim to support ICRI to effectively ensure the perspectives of young people are integrated into the conservation, protection, and restoration of coral reefs.

The youth delegation had 3 objectives:

- **Objective 1:** Formulate an Informal Working Group throughout the General Meeting.
- **Objective 2:** Develop a solution-based reflection for the needs, concerns, and aspirations of the youth community, to ensure the perspectives of young people are integrated into the conservation, protection, and restoration of coral reefs.
- **Objective 3:** Recommend effective communication channels to engage and involve youth within the ICRI frameworks.

WORKING GROUP FORMULATION & COMPOSITION

The Working Group (WG) convened on the afternoon of 19th September where the team were acquainted with each other and thereafter guided by Margaux Monfared and Tom Dallison (ICRI Secretariat). The WG was composed of a dynamic and vibrant team with a diverse representation from various organisations, from multiple ICRI members, who are dedicated to the conservation of coral reefs and associated marine and coastal ecosystems.

1. Diwigdi Valiente, Panama (Youth delegation)
2. Esther Maina, Kenyan Youth Biodiversity Network (Youth delegation)
3. Alexis Sturm, NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Programme (ICRI Member)
4. Haley Williams, Wildlife Conservation Society (ICRI Member)
5. Christophe Blazy, UNEP-CAR/RCU - SPAW-RAC (ICRI Member)
6. Karin Moejes, CORDIO East Africa (ICRI Member)
7. Risla Ibrahim, Maldives Marine Research Institute (ICRI Member)

The efforts of the WG were also synergised with contributions and interactions with member organisations, and intergenerational exchanges with Indigenous and Local Knowledge representatives, present at the General Meeting to foster cross-generational dialogue to enhance sustained collaborations on coral reef conservation and global efforts representing a youth perspective throughout the 37th General Meeting.

The Youth WG presented the work conducted throughout the meeting on 23rd September 2023, during Session 9, which was followed by a 30-minute panel discussion operated under Chatham House Rules. This enabled ICRI members to discuss the preceding presentation, and dialogue with the youth.

The WG has also delivered a written summary on the work of the youth delegation based on the presentation as outlined by this document. This summary will serve as a valuable resource for ICRI's meaningful engagement of youth in coral reef conservation actions and strategies.

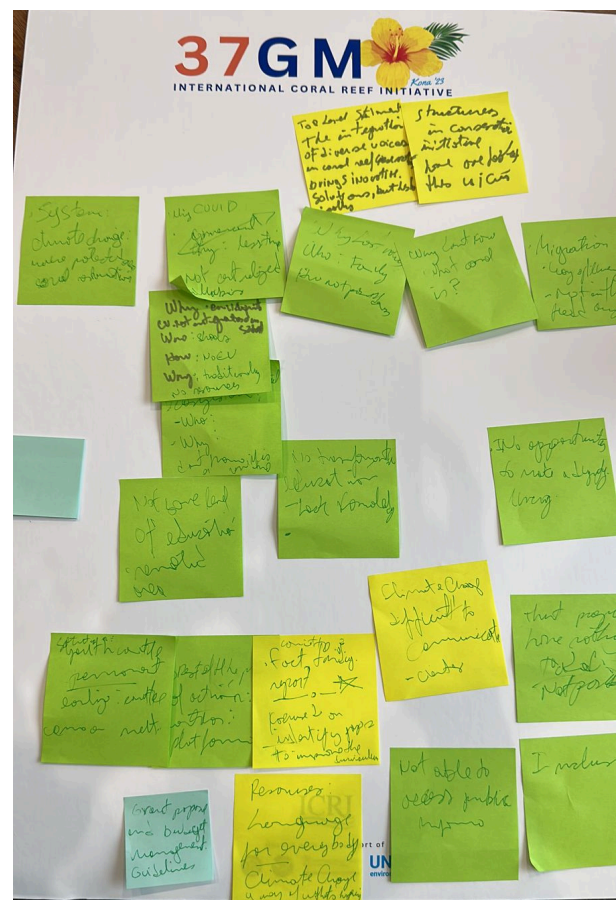
SOLUTION-BASED YOUTH REFLECTIONS

This Problem Framing Tree was designed as the result of a thinking session to dive deep into the intricacies of challenges faced in coral reef conservation, to better understand the problems, especially in the involvement of youth from diverse backgrounds, and to provide potential solutions. Venturing down the branches, helped the WG to gain clarity on the foundational issues, ensuring solutions addressed the heart of the matter and resonate with young people.

The Insight Tree, tailored to the WG's specific context, delves into the profound realisations surrounding youth's connection, or lack thereof, to coral reef conservation. Beginning with overarching insights about the disengagement of certain youth populations, this tree progresses by asking probing questions.

The User Tree: In the vast realm of coral conservation, understanding the human element is paramount. Coral reefs, vibrant and diverse, are directly linked to communities worldwide, especially to coastal and island populations that have coexisted with these marine wonders for centuries. However, the connection people have with these ecosystems is rapidly changing due to numerous factors such as urbanisation, migration, and changing socio-cultural dynamics. Among these changes, a pivotal group emerges as both vulnerable and potential changemakers: the youth. They are the heirs to our planet's future, yet many are increasingly disconnected from their natural heritage.

The User's Need Tree was made to deeply understand and dissect the specific requirements and aspirations of the youth. Beginning with a broad overarching need at the top, we branched out to explore the deeper, underlying causes, influences, and motivations that give rise to this need. By constantly probing with "Why?" and "How?" questions, the WG delved into the intricacies and complexities of the user's needs, offering a clearer lens into the multifaceted challenges and opportunities young people face.



NEEDS OF THE YOUTH COMMUNITY IN CORAL REEF CONSERVATION

- Reliable source of information, easy access to actions and opportunities to engage
- A clearly defined coral reef strategy to incorporate youth insights, perspectives, and efforts into actionable plans, both at the national and global levels
- Opportunities to lead and influence and utilize their potential and expertise
- Training and mentorship opportunities among ICRI members, to empower youth to contribute to conservation efforts #ForCoral
- Technical and financial resources to support youth-led conservation initiatives
- Meaningful engagement from the initial stages of projects, plans, and policy development in order to foster a sense of ownership and stake in steering action
- Value and incorporate the contributions of young professionals and knowledge holders

CONCERNS OF THE YOUTH COMMUNITY

Based on ICRI's emphasis on the inclusion of Indigenous and Local Knowledge, and youth communities in coral reef conservation efforts the following insights were obtained:

- **Informal Participation Remains Unnoticed:** While many young individuals are actively participating in marine conservation, their efforts often go unnoticed. This is because a considerable number of them might not be working in conservation in an official capacity. Their contributions, which may come in the form of internships or volunteer activities, are unofficial and therefore not always tracked.

Such unrecognised efforts signify a substantial loss of potential collaborative efforts and fresh perspectives.

- **Addressing Tensions:** There is a need to address the problem in the tension with historical practices and structures of conventional global conservation initiatives, which have often inadvertently excluded or overlooked the critical voices and expertise of youth, leading to a gap in understanding and application of holistic, community-centred solutions.
- **Gaps with Youth Strategies Implementation:** Despite the existence of strategies like the IUCN Youth Strategy 2030 and the UN Youth 2030, there are still significant gaps in their implementation. These include weak execution, limited youth mainstreaming efforts, and institutional barriers to meaningful youth engagement. There is need for actionable plans on how to make both new and existing strategies effective to ensure youth both at the national and global levels contribute meaningfully and be a part of larger conservation narratives.
- **Perception of Inexperience:** A pervasive issue is the perception of youth as inexperienced or lacking the necessary expertise due to their age. This stereotype can prevent them from being taken seriously in conservation dialogues. Instead of viewing youth as mere beneficiaries or interns, there needs to be a shift towards recognising them as valuable stakeholders with unique insights, ensuring they are included at the decision-making table and involved in outcomes implementation.
- **Traditional Conservation Paradigms:** Traditional marine conservation education often doesn't resonate with the diverse experiences of the youth.

Current methods may also not cater to the unique perspectives of those from different backgrounds, disabilities, genders, or geographies, resulting in a disconnect.

There is the need to embrace transformative education that nurtures connectedness with nature, is holistic in its approaches, integrates both formal and informal learning systems, is rights-based, inclusive, and fosters diversity. Education has also been identified by the Intergovernmental Science Policy Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) as a key leverage point in addressing the root causes of the interconnected environmental challenges.

ASPIRATIONS OF THE YOUTH COMMUNITY

The youth community aspires to have a platform where their voices are not only heard but valued, and their perspectives contribute significantly to shaping policies and actions related to coral reef conservation. This aspiration encompasses the desire for meaningful involvement, mentorship, and capacity-building programmes that value the perspective and contributions of youth, nurturing their leadership and advocacy skills. Youth aim to bridge the gap between generations and cultures, collaborating with Indigenous and Local Knowledge holders, women, and other stakeholders. By fostering this, ICRI can harness the energy and creativity of youth, ensuring a sustainable and inclusive future for nature and people.



REFLECTIONS ON ICRI'S YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CHANNELS & FUTURE INTEGRATION

1. **Establishing a dedicated landing page/section on ICRI's existing website that;**

- a. regularly provides information on available grants, fellowships, jobs, events and opportunities for youth engagement on coral reef conservation.
- b. maintains a living list of youth-led coral reef related conservation organizations to facilitate partnerships and collaborations with ICRI members

2. **Establish a structured Youth Ambassador Program** within ICRI, where passionate and motivated young individuals can represent their communities, share ideas, access mentorship, training and capacity building opportunities to develop skills and knowledge aligning with ICRI's areas of work and actively participate in decision-making processes related to coral reef conservation.

3. **Establish a continuous working group**, to ensure youth engagement at ICRI meetings, task forces, and committees. Allow youth delegates to have a voice, actively participate in discussions, and present their perspectives and recommendations.

4. **Provide necessary support and guidance** needed for the functioning of the youth Working Group. facilitating participation from a wider diversity of youth and organising the youth delegation to have at least 2-3 virtual meetings ahead of the General Meeting to give young people ample time to engage in youth-led intergenerational and intercultural dialogues, develop

youth positions as well as have themselves more prepared to navigate through the busy General Meeting schedule and delivering their delegated tasks related to the meeting.

5. **Leverage youth** to advance local community engagement, including through;

- a. approaches that would develop resources for awareness creation, amplify local voices and celebrate culture e.g., collaborative art installations and storytelling; and
- b. already existing initiatives such as youth-led community integrated consultations in policy review, formulation, and implementation.

6. **Conduct needs-based assessment** to identify the specific priorities of youth and gain a comprehensive understanding of their challenges and opportunities.



CONCLUSION

Youth are not just beneficiaries but are key stakeholders in the conservation of coral reefs and associated ecosystems. Despite their disproportionate vulnerability to environmental challenges and the locked-in impacts, young people worldwide play a vital role in shaping environmental management policies every day. We are thankful for the opportunity to engage with ICRI and envision a future where we continue to play a role in incorporating diverse and balanced voices into ICRI's frameworks, and where youth are meaningfully engaged, empowered to foster intergenerational dialogues, and bring fresh perspectives to motivate action #ForCoral.

The ICRI logo is centered in the upper half of the image. It features the letters 'ICRI' in a white, serif font. Below the letters are two white, wavy lines that resemble a stylized wave or the top of a coral reef structure. The background of the entire page is a vibrant underwater scene with a large school of orange and yellow fish swimming over a diverse coral reef. The water is clear and blue, with sunlight filtering through from the surface.

ICRI