



Stakeholder Consultation Meeting with Dive Centers and Guesthouses in the South Ari Region to discuss the Proposed Regulations and Zonation for South Ari Marine Protected Area

April 2019



Date: 29 April 2019

Time: 14:00 – 16:00

Venue: Conference Hall, Sun Island Resort & Spa

Attendees

IUCN

Ms. Najfa Shaheem Razee – Chief Technical Officer, IUCN
Ms. Fathimath Shihany Habeeb – Social Science Officer (Socio Economic), IUCN
Ms. Ifham Hassan Zareer – Communications Associate, IUCN
Ms. Josephine Langley – Consultant, IUCN

Environment Protection Agency

Ms. Farhath Ali-Assistant Director, EPA
Dr. Ibrahim Mohamed- Deputy Director General, EPA
Mr. Maahid Abdul Rahman-Senior GIS Officer, EPA

Ministry of Environment

Dr. Hussain Rasheed Hassan-Minister, Ministry of Environment
Mr. Mohamed Sameer- Deputy Minister, Ministry of Environment
Mr. Saaif Mohamed Rasheed-Assistant Environmental Officer, Ministry of Environment

Island Council

Mr. Mufeed-President, Maamigili Council

Guesthouses and Dive Centers

Mr. Mohamed Usman – Operations Manager, Atoll Key
Mr. Nasrulla Ibrahim – Island Divers
Mr. Ahmed Shiruhan – Manager, Dhiguveli
Ms. Mette Ellis Nussbavmer – Dive Base Leader, Boutique Beach Dive
Ms. Chloe Winn – Excursion Guide, Bliss
Mr. Ibrahim Abdul Kaleem – Manager, Dhivehi Expertise
Mr. Mohamed Samee – Owner/MD, Atoll Key
Mr. Usamath Gasim – Director, Dhigurah Divers
Mr. Mohamed Waheed – Excursions Guide, Dhigurah Retreat Beach
Mr. Mohamed Shirukhaan – Dhigurah Beach Inn
Mr. Shamooru – Owner, Shamar Guest House
Mr. Ali – Excursion Guide, Koimala Inn
Mr. Ali Shaheen – Assistant Operations Manager, Bliss Dhigurah
Mr. Afsal Adam – Hotel Manager, Boutique Beach
Mr. Ahmed Reehan – Hotel Manager, White Sand Dhigurah
Mr. Ali Ibrahim Didi – Manager/Owner, Athiri Beach
Mr. Naushad Mohamed – Manager, Island Divers
Mr. Mohamed Seeneen – Director, Dive Oceanus

Areas discussed:

1. Presentation of the proposed regulations and zonation of South Ari Marine Protected Area
2. Concerns regarding the proposed management measures
3. Additional questions by IUCN and EPA to help formulate a comprehensive management plan

<p>1. Presentation of the draft management plan of South Ari Marine Protected Area</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EPA commenced the meeting with a few words stressing on the ecological and socio-economic value of the area, key issues in SAMPA, and the need for a management plan. • IUCN presented the key points of the proposed regulations and zonation and opened the floor up for discussion.
<p>2. Concerns over the number of passengers allowed per vessel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All parties collectively disagreed with the number of people per vessel (10 people excluding crew). • EPA responded stating that this is the best practice in many marine protected areas across the world and based on the existing Maldives Whale Shark Interaction Guideline. • It was also stressed by Dhigurah dive centers that it will be very difficult to dive and snorkel separately, as they take guests together for both. • It was also suggested that combined tickets be sold for diving and snorkeling instead of selling tickets for each one separately. • It was stated that there are 6 dive centers in Dhigurah alone, and so it will be very difficult for them if the numbers are limited. • EPA and IUCN stated that this is a preliminary approach, and that the number of vessels and the number of people per vessel can be negotiated. The main aim here is so that the whale sharks and the people are safe. • The number that was proposed from the dive centers for each whale shark encounter was 50 people. • Boutique Beach Dive stated that there are many new boats coming from Male' and other atolls for whale shark excursions and in most instances, they do not follow the guidelines, do not stick to the speed limit and take over whale shark encounters, as they are desperate to show their guests one. As opposed to this, people from South Ari follow the Whale Shark Interaction Guideline.
<p>3. Concerns over the fee charged for entry into SAMPA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fee was heavily disagreed upon. • EPA responded saying that a Willingness to Pay survey was done using forms filled by guests from liveaboards, guest houses and resorts, and guests were willing to pay a fee to visit this premium site which is known for whale shark sightings throughout the year. • EPA also explained that the money collected through fees would go into a conservation fund, which will then be used to finance projects within the region. It was also explained it is important to have sustainable financing in place for the protected area management to be effective.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was then asked if there was a budget to manage SAMPA, to which IUCN responded stating that 3.1 million is just the recurrent cost, and that together with the cost of hiring rangers, giving them a vessel etc. needs a useable, sustainable financial plan. • EPA stressed that such management plans have worked in Ningaloo Reef in Australia and protected areas in Africa. There was a general disagreement that what has worked for other parts of the world might not necessarily work for the Maldives. • Dive centers also asked why the money collected from green tax and GST cannot be used to fund this, and protested that the rates are too high already. To cut costs, it was then suggested that Marine Police be stationed there instead of rangers. Questions were also asked about exploring government funding and why South Ari is not being developed with the taxes already taken. • To which, the Minister of Environment responded that the benefits accrued from this should be for the use of Maldivians, and not just one specific area. He stressed on the importance of management of the beautiful creatures in SAMPA, and stated that tourists should pay for using this resource. • Further questions were asked about the green tax, and the Minister responded by explaining how the green tax gets transferred to the green fund, where there is a committee in charge. From the 900 million expected to receive for the year 2019 as green tax, 600 million will be spent this year on sanitation, sewage and water for islands. And hence, the money is circulated back into the community. • Divers from Dhigurah commented stating that Dhigurah has 229 beds, and even though the government generates a hefty sum from the island through tax, proper sewage and sanitation is still not being implemented. • Dhigurah dive centers asked how much the fee would be, and EPA stated that it is likely to be between 25 – 30 USD, but an exact amount will be finalized after analysing the data from Willingness to Pay surveys conducted amongst tourists.
<p>4. Concerns over the establishment of rangers in SAMPA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dhigurah dive centers enquired about the qualifications of rangers. • EPA responded stating that they will be trained both in-field in Hanifaru Bay, Addu and Fuvahmulah nature parks and at EPA. Also, a training specific for rangers will be conducted to train on data collection, existing legislations and regulations, protected area management and enforcement mechanisms • It was unanimously suggested that Marine Police be stationed in SAMPA instead of rangers, given the experience in Hanifaru Bay.
<p>5. Concerns over the number of hours a vessel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was stated that as most tours run from 9:00 – 13:00, diving can be done afterwards in SAMPA from 14:00-18:00.

<p>is permitted to use SAMPA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions were asked about the alternate days proposed in the draft. IUCN answered that this measure was suggested by users in the stakeholder meetings held in January 2019 to manage the number of vessels in SAMPA at a given time, and that it only applies to whale shark zones. • It was also suggested that 9:00 – 14:00 could be hours where you have to buy a ticket, and after 14:00 can be free hours to use SAMPA. • There are currently very good dive sites in SAMPA that are frequented. It was stated that after 14:00 and before 9:00, hardly any boats are in the area. • But the issue then would be that crowding could occur after 14:00 as there is no regulation then.
<p>6. Speed control and keeping distance</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dhigurah and Maamigili dive centers stated that it is not possible to stop the engine when 10 meters from a whale shark, as the boat crew might need to rescue someone. Often snorkelers can get cramps and get exhausted easily from swimming after whale sharks. • A language barrier also exists with tourists, which makes it harder for guides to understand them, and therefore it is important that the vessel stays alert at all times. • If the vessel's engine is off, with the current, it is also possible for it to hit the reef. • IUCN and EPA stated that this is a requirement in the existing whale shark interaction guideline. It was also stated that people who are not comfortable in water can wear life jackets, to which the dive centers responded stating that it is not about not knowing how to swim, but rather that people get excited when they see whale sharks, and then exhaust themselves and get tired very quickly. • No dive center or guest house had issues maintaining the 500 m distance from each other when in SAMPA, keeping distance from the reef, or keeping distance with whale sharks during a whale shark encounter • It was also suggested by Boutique Beach, that instead of allowing speedboats inside SAMPA, only traditional dhonis be allowed, which effectively limits speed, and also makes it impossible to rush to encounters in different areas of SAMPA, thus limiting overcrowding during whale shark encounters too. However, there was disagreement on this by other guest houses in the room.
<p>7. Concerns over prior booking and zonation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was asked by a Dhigurah dive center, that if the weather is bad and that if the diving sites are booked, what could they do in that instance. • IUCN proposed that they will have the option to book in advance and there are multiple dive sites within SAMPA boundary as well as outside.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was then told by a Dhigurah dive center that if smaller guest houses and dive centers were having issues with the draft, certainly bigger resorts would have more concerns. • It was then suggested that instead of having different zones, it might be easier to restrict timings (9:00 – 14:00) • There was concern over how the zonation was done, to which EPA responded stating that this was based on information collected from a social survey, ecological assessment of SAMPA, and MWSRP’s whale shark sighting data of over 6 years. • Guesthouses and dive centers also highlighted that specific days can be allocated for safaris, as they bring in high volumes. For instance, Wednesday and Thursday can be days allocated for safaris.
<p>8. Additional questions by IUCN and EPA to help formulate a comprehensive management plan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EPA requested the dive centers and guest houses to provide data on whale shark sightings, the dive sites that are in frequent use, the number of vessels that enter SAMPA, and the number of tourists per vessel so these things could be taken into account when formulating the management plan. • It was shared by Dhigurah dive centers that Dive Zone 3 is used twice a day at least. • It was suggested by dive centers that a form be made so all the dive centers and guesthouses can fill in the data IUCN and EPA needs for the management plan.
<p>9. Advisory Board</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was stated by EPA that the Advisory Board will have yearly rotations, and one from dive centers and one from guesthouses will be present. • The representatives selected for the Advisory Board from dive centers and guesthouses are: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dive center: Naushad – Island Divers, Dhigurah 2. Guesthouse: Afzal – Boutique Beach, Dhigurah
<p>10. Additional issues/comments discussed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EPA highlighted that they have a hotline for complaints regarding environmental issues, and that complaints can be submitted via Viber, Twitter, Facebook or email, and that they have only received one complaint for SAMPA thus far. • Several people highlighted EPA’s incompetence in dealing with such complaints. • It was highlighted by Dhigurah dive centers that captains too need to be trained, and that unskilled captains are often the cause of serious injuries to whale sharks. • Boutique Beach Dive also highlighted that if SAMPA is closed off as an MPA, it is likely that the dive sites around SAMPA will get overcrowded. This area is also known to have abundant marine life, and therefore this needs to be taken into consideration. • A dive center from Dhigurah suggested that Yala National Park in Sri Lanka could be taken as an example, where the locals also benefit from the protected area. To which EPA replied that the money collected would go into a fund to finance

	<p>developmental/environment related projects in the area in the future.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was also suggested that operators from other atolls should not be able to use SAMPA like the operators in South Ari, to which EPA responded stating that there will be stakeholders from South Ari in the Advisory Board. • Furthermore, Minister also stated that social projects will be funded from the money collected, and that investing in South Ari is a wonderful idea, and promised a proper sewage and sanitation system for Dhigurah next year. • Minister also asked what else Dhigurah needed, to which the dive centers and guesthouses responded stating that they need a dive chamber, proper sanitation and sewage, water, dive training and trained dive doctors. • Concern over the feasibility of the management plan was discussed. The Minister responded to this by stating that this plan will be feasible, and especially with proper regulations and allocation of different days to different operators. • Boutique Beach Dive expressed concern that as one operator can register multiple vessels, one operator can then come in with several boats and bookings, and hog the area. A solution to this could be that each operator is allowed one vessel. • Questions were asked regarding having an EPA certified dive guide on board. EPA responded by stating that exams will be conducted once a month, a fee will be charged for the license, and the license will be valid for 3 years.
<p>11. Key areas agreed upon</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SAMPA needs to be sustainably managed • All vessels using SAMPA need to be registered • Rangers will be stationed in SAMPA • An Advisory Board of 15 people will be established to oversee the management of SAMPA • Number of vessels permitted into a zone will be restricted • Daily and monthly challenges will be addressed by the Advisory Committee • A nominal fee will be taken as an entry ticket.
<p>12. Attachments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation on the proposed new regulations and zonation for SAMPA



South Ari Marine Protected Area management plan meeting

21 April 2019
Special hours of 8:30am - 12:00pm 1/2

*Location: Conference Room
 South Ari Marine MPA*

#	Name	Organization	Designation	Contact	Email	Signature
1	Elwin Hosten	IUCN	Senior Specialist	7990182	ehosten@iucn.org	[Signature]
2	Wahneema Lubiano	OPF	Executive Director	7990211	wahneema@opf.org	[Signature]
3	Yasmin	-	-	7990211	yasmin@opf.org	[Signature]
4	Mohamed Elshaykh	ASAC	Assistant Secretary	7990211	mshaykh@opf.org	[Signature]
5	Regina	OPF	Director	7990211	regina@opf.org	[Signature]
6	Mohamed Elshaykh	OPF	Assistant Secretary	7990211	mshaykh@opf.org	[Signature]
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