



**Stakeholder Consultation Meeting with Resorts 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: 09:30 – 12:00

Venue: Conference Hall, Sun Island Resort & Spa

Attendees

International Union for Conservation of Nature

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
Mr. Yoosuf Rilwan – 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

Mr. Saaif Mohamed Rasheed – Assistant Environmental Officer, ME

Resorts

Mr. Manuel Scherl – Dive Center Manager, Euro Divers, Vilamendhoo Resort
Mr. Husnee Ibrahim – SEA Manager, Vilamendhoo Resort
Mr. Hassan Fayaz – Recreational Manager, Conrad Maldives Rangali Island
Ms. Sandriene LeBigot – Dive Center Manager, Euro Divers
Mr. Mark Mcmillan – Marine Biologist, Lux* South Ari Atoll
Mr. Maatey – Water Sports, Sun Island Resort and Spa
Mr. Shaheen Ali – Excursion Manager, Sun Island Resort and Spa
Mr. Mohamed Fayaz – Operations, Dive Oceanus
Mr. Shahid Gasim – Dive Center Manager, Dive Oceanus
Mr. Mohamed Fazeen – Holiday Resort/Sun Island Resort and Spa
Mr. Abdullah Faiz – Guest Service Manager, Sun Island Resort and Spa
Mr. Musthafa Mohamed – Sales Manager, Sun Island Resort and Spa

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

1. Presentation of the draft management plan of South Ari Marine Protected Area	<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 proposed regulations and zonation for SAMPA and opened the floor up for discussion.
2. Concerns over the number of passengers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The resorts collectively disagreed with the number of people per vessel (10 people excluding crew).

<p>allowed per vessel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EPA responded saying that it is a tentative figure, and that it can be up for discussion. • It was asked if a resort can have two vessels to go on whale shark excursions, to which EPA responded that it is possible if the vessels are registered. • Sun Island expressed further concerns, stating that their occupancy is very high, and therefore it will be impossible for them to manage with 10 snorkelers per vessel. • 10 divers per vessel was also regarded as very inconvenient for resorts. Sun Island especially protested, as they have large volume of divers and guests who go on excursions in the area (150 – 200 tourists per day). • When asked what the numbers in the proposed regulations were based on, EPA and IUCN stated that it is based on the existing Maldives Whale Shark Interaction Guideline, best practice guidelines across the world, and based on data that states that there are instances of about 200 – 150 guests per whale shark encounter, and this in turn leads to injuries in whale sharks, and does not make for a pleasant and a safe experience for the guests either.
<p>3. Concerns over the fee charged for entry into SAMPA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fee was heavily disagreed upon. It was stated that they have had to refund guests many times after not seeing whale sharks and other charismatic species when on excursions and therefore an added cost would not be well received by guests. • EPA responded by 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 that it is important to have sustainable financing in place for the protected area management to be effective. • Resorts 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, and guests might not be inclined to pay such a fee, especially in low budget resorts even if relatively high end resorts such as Lux* Maldives agrees to the fee.
<p>4. Concerns over prior booking of zones</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions were asked about divers using the whale shark zones, and EPA answered that all the vessels will need to book in advance. • It was then asked by resorts about how prior would they have to book a spot, if for example, if they have guests every day and people who stay short term might then not get to see whale sharks or go on dives in the area because it could be fully booked.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sun Island also expressed concern over the fact that three teams organize excursions at their resort given the huge volume of guests that Sun Island hosts and that prior bookings and limitation of numbers can significantly lower the number of people they can take for whale shark excursions. • IUCN responded by stating that there will be a grace period before a fee system is implemented, and that multiple mechanisms will be tested before finalizing the management plan. If Sun Island is concerned over its volume, a partnership agreement can be perhaps explored, like in Hanifaru Bay, where Sun Island contributes to SAMPa and in return gets a better a rate. • It was also asked if operators could go to a zone other than the one booked if it is busy or if the operator changes their mind. • EPA responded stating that in such an instance, the resort should contact rangers, and if the zone is free, they can go. • It was also stressed on that diving is only allowed in dive zones. In dive zones, dive vessels get priority, and in whale shark zones, whale shark excursion vessels will get priority. • It was also asked if the same rules that apply for whale sharks apply for manta rays, turtles and other charismatic species, as resorts sell it as different excursions. • It was suggested by EPA and IUCN that a few zones can be booked in that instance, where the possibility of spotting the species are higher. • It was then stressed by EPA and IUCN that this is only the proposed zonation, and the draft can be subject to change after phase 2 (testing phase), after the effectiveness of the management plan is tested.
5. Concerns over dive zones and dive sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As diving when whale shark spotting is discouraged under the draft management plan, Sun Island asked how they should maintain conduct if they were to spot a whale shark during a dive, to which EPA responded stating that in that instance, they can of course view and enjoy the encounter provided they keep their distance and follow the Whale Shark Interaction Guidelines.
6. Recreational fishing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was highlighted by Sun Island that grouper fishing for exportation is still ongoing in SAMPa. EPA responded by stating that commercial fishing in SAMPa is banned, and therefore will be subject to a fine. Recreational fishing on the other hand, is allowed in multi-use areas, and an extraction permit will be issued for this.
7. Concerns over the establishment of rangers in SAMPa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There were concerns over the rangers giving an unfair advantage to some operators over the others in Hanifaru Bay. • Sun Island further proposed that the Marine Police be stationed at SAMPa instead of rangers, given the experience in Hanifaru Bay

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EPA responded by stating that tourists and passengers using SAMPA are likely to be intimidated by Marine Police, to which resorts responded by stating that Marine Police can perhaps wear a different uniform. • EPA then stressed that if rangers do not maintain proper ethics, the police will be informed, and that the authorities will be working closely to earn the trust of the operators in the region. • Questions were asked on what power and authority the rangers have, and EPA responded by stating that they can immediately fine if the proof is there. • Concern was expressed over how ranger recruitment was done. If rangers are selected within the islands in South Ari, chances of them being biased in favour of certain operators will be higher according to the resorts. • To which EPA responded stating that an advisory board will be established that will monitor the performance of rangers.
8. Concerns over the number of hours a vessel is permitted to use SAMPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sun Island disagreed with the 3 hours proposed in the draft. They also stated that they spend about 7 hours in SAMPA searching for whale sharks during an excursion. • They also stated that 1 dive vessel per site will not do, and especially because the sites will be pre-booked, they were concerned that they will not have access to the best sites, given the number of operators in the area • EPA stated that rangers can also help inform them of whale sharks sightings and that the whale shark flag proposed in the draft would help in these instances. It was also emphasized that the Whale Shark Interactions Guidelines be followed throughout an encounter.
9. Speed control and keeping distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sun Island stressed on the amount of injured whale sharks seen in SAMPA and stressed on the need to be more mindful when using SAMPA • No resorts had any issue with speed control or vessels 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 Holiday Island, 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.
10. Concerns over research organisations operating in SAMPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sun Island expressed concerns over whale shark tagging before, and how they helped stop the practice. EPA stated that no permits are given under EPA's authorization for whale shark tagging anymore.
11. Concerns over the functionality and effective establishment of the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was repeatedly stated that the model in Hanifaru Bay has failed, and therefore many operators expressed distrust in the system.

management plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was also expressed that EPA needs to work on a constructive plan after receiving feedback from the stakeholders. • Vilamendhoo Resort asked how the test phase will be carried out, and expressed concerns over the effectiveness of the management plan. It was stated that if one operator does not comply, the whole plan could fall apart, and that enforcement is key. • EPA responded by stating that the plan will be enforced in stages and various management measures will be tested before finalizing the plan. It was also stated that rangers will be trained on environmental management, and that they will also collect in-field data to help implement the plan.
12. Additional questions by IUCN and EPA to help formulate a comprehensive management plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EPA and IUCN requested the resorts 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.
13. Advisory Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was stated by EPA that the Advisory Board will have yearly rotations, and can have one representative for low volume resorts, and one representative for high volume resorts. • The representatives selected for the Advisory Board from resorts are: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Abdullah Faiz- Guest Service Manager, Sun Island Resort and Spa 2. Hassan Fayaz- Recreational Manager, Conrad Maldives Rangali Island <p>It was further suggested that dive centers and resorts can meet prior to the Advisory Board meetings to discuss and exchange ideas on key issues to ensure all voices are heard.</p>
14. Additional issues discussed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was concern that their experience and issues might go unrecognised during the formulation of the management plan even though it was repeatedly stated by IUCN and EPA that this stakeholder consultation session was to get their feedback to formulate a better management plan. • EPA also 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. • EPA also highlighted the lack of awareness sessions conducted on their part and stressed on the importance of doing so.
12. Attachments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation on the proposed new regulations and zonation for SAMPA



South Ari Marine Protected Area management plan meeting

29 April 2019

Resorts in South Ari region

Venue: Sun Island Resort
4 SPA
Conference Room

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