



Ministry of Climate  
Change, Environment  
and Energy

# **Consultation Workshop Report**

## **South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa)**

### **Draft Management Plan**

**30<sup>th</sup> August 2024, ADh Dhigurah**

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**Prepared by:** Eamaan Rasheed, Conservation Officer, South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) Unit, Protected Areas Section, Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy.

**Reviewed by:** Protected Areas Section, Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy.

## 1. Introduction

The South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) Management Plan Consultation Workshop was held on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 2024 in ADh Dhigurah as part of the International Whale Shark Day celebration. This workshop was the first in a series of consultation workshops, aimed at finalizing the management plan for the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) to ensure that the Marine Protected Area (MPA) will be fully operational with an effective management plan by the end of 2024.

A total of 40 participants attended the workshop, representing resorts, guesthouses, councils from islands adjacent to the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) boundary, the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The majority (77%) were from the tourism sector (resorts and guesthouses), while the remainder represented the research, education sectors, and council officials. Prior to the workshop, the draft versions of the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) Management Plan (Dhivehi and Unofficial English translation) were shared by the Ministry with participants who registered for the workshop. To ensure a productive and interactive consultation, two online briefing sessions were also held prior to the workshop to provide an overview of the workshop objectives and to familiarize the participants with the relevant documents of the workshop.

The workshop agenda included key presentations from the Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy on the Draft Management Plan for the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) and an overview of the Whale Shark Guideline implication on the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Additionally, the Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme (MWSRP) shared recent research findings on local tourism business operators' perceptions of the Marine Protected Area (MPA). In between presentations, participants engaged in group discussions, identifying resource uses, prohibited activities, major threats to the South Ari Marine Park, and proposed solutions to these threats. The workshop concluded with a survey, gathering broader stakeholder feedback and additional input for the draft management plan.

## 2. Main threats identified by workshop participants

Group discussions were held during which the participants identified the main threats in the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa). **Figure. 1.** depicts the mentimeter results for the main threats identified.



During the group discussions, participants also noted that most excursions within the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) are often negative and stressful for the whale sharks, guides as well as guests as breaches of the code of conduct, speeding and overcrowding are a daily occurrence. Additional concerns were raised regarding a Telegram group which circulates whale shark sighting alerts to all tour operators, guesthouses, and resorts, as this practice ultimately contributes to speeding and overcrowding.

### 3. Findings from the End of Session Survey Form

#### 3.1. Current Use of the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa)

Majority of the participants indicated that they used the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) for whale shark related activities from 6 am to 12 pm (54%). The current scenario (**Figure 3.**) for the number of people observed in water per whale shark within the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) are as follows:

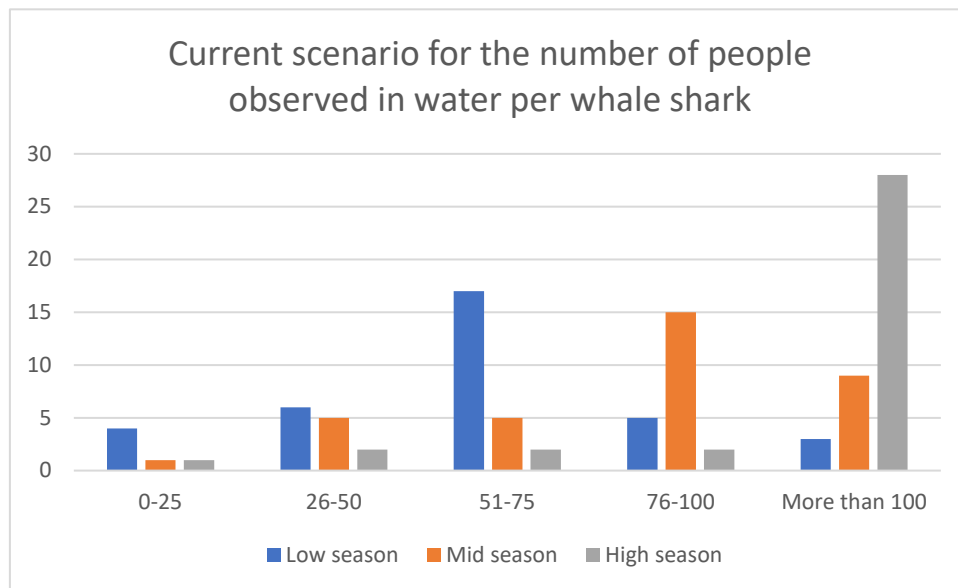


Figure 3. Current scenario for the number of people observed in water per whale shark within SAMPa

Results indicated that during the high season, more than 100 individuals (80%) are generally observed in the water per whale shark within the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa). In the mid-season, this number generally ranges from 76 to 100 individuals (42.9%), while during the low season, it is mainly between 51 and 75 individuals (48.6%). Given that the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) is the largest Marine Protected Area (MPA) in the Maldives, with a significant number of resource users and stakeholders, the implications of the existing whale

shark conservation guidelines on the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) scenario were also discussed during the workshop.

The current scenario (**Figure. 4.**) for the number of vessels in the contact zone around a whale shark in the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) are as follows: during the high season, there are typically more than 10 vessels (74.3%); during the mid-season, more than 10 vessels (42.6%); and during the low season, there are usually 4-6 vessels (31.4%).

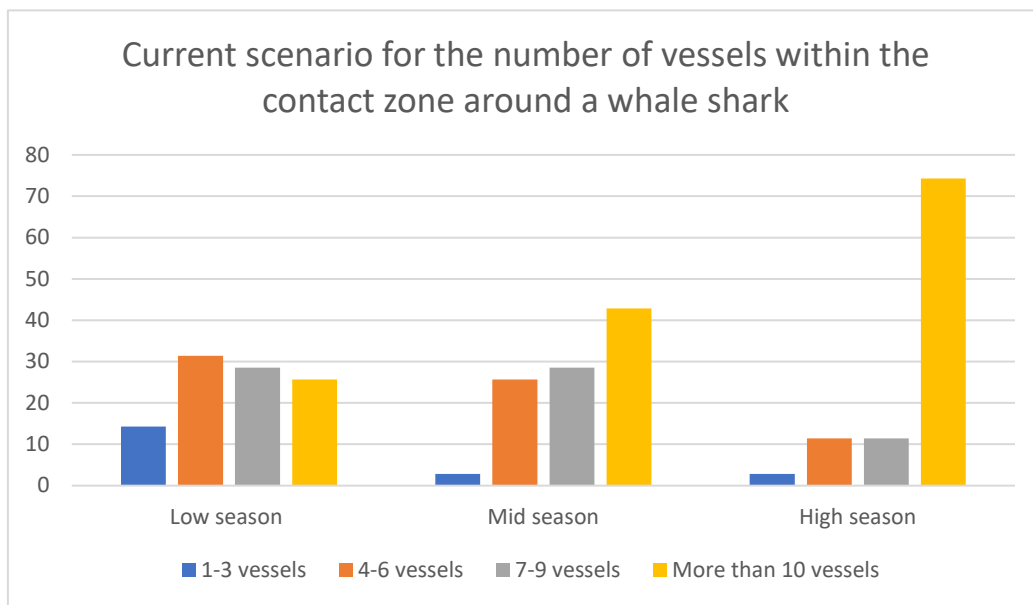


Figure 4. Current scenario for the number of vessels within the contact zone around a whale shark in SAMPa.

### 3.2. *Whaleshark Conservation Guideline and its implication for the South Ari Marine Park Management*

Taking the current scenario of the MPA into consideration, the proposed maximum number of people in the water per whale shark in the draft management plan is set at 50 individuals, and 54% of workshop participants supported this figure. Other suggestions from participants included a limit of 15-20 people, focusing on the maximum number of boats instead of the maximum number of people, while others agreed that the limit should depend on the number of trained guides and confident swimmers present. However, simply limiting the number of boats does not directly address overcrowding, as fewer vessels could still carry more passengers based on their size. Some participants expressed that a limit of 50 people is initially high, but suggested that gradually reducing the maximum number of people over time could make this limit more manageable and sustainable. Participants also stressed that encounters with fewer boats and people are more lasting and successful as the behavior of the whale sharks are different when the experience is more exclusive.

Consequently, the proposed maximum number of vessels allowed in the management plan for the contact zone around a whale shark within the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) is set at 6 vessels (including the ranger vessel). The majority of participants (74%) agreed with this proposed limit, as illustrated in **Figure 5**.

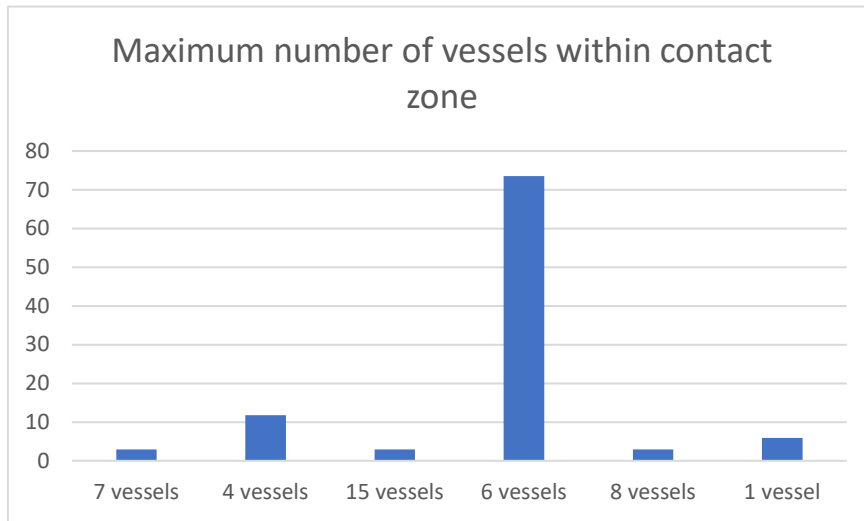


Figure 5. Proposed maximum number of vessels within contact zone

Participants were also asked to recommend a guide-to-visitor ratio (**Figure 6**). Among the responses, 29% suggested a ratio of 1 guide per 10 visitors, while another 29% proposed a ratio of 1 guide per 6 visitors.

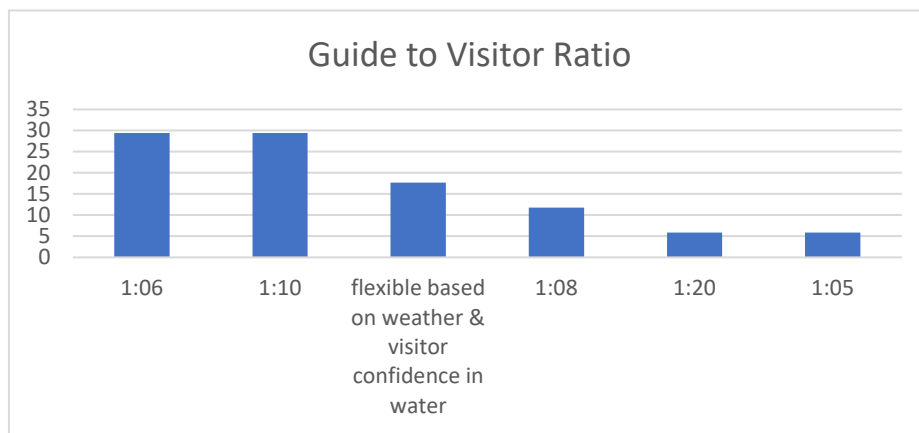


Figure 6. Guide to visitor ratio for whale shark watching within SAMPa

The following stakeholders were proposed as relevant stakeholders for the advisory committee of the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) in the draft management plan:

1. Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy
2. Environmental Protection Agency
3. Ministry of Tourism
4. Ministry of Fisheries and Ocean Resources
5. Ministry of Defense
6. Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation
7. South Ari Atoll Council
8. ADh Dhigurah Council

9. ADh Maamigili Council
10. ADh Fenfushi Council
11. ADh Dhihdhoo Council
12. National Boating Association of Maldives
13. Divers Association of Maldives
14. Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI)
15. NGO operating within the area
16. An individual representing a resort or guesthouse within the area

Additional suggestions for members of the advisory committee included a representative from the ADh Dhangethi Council, one member from each resort in the area, a representative from resorts and another from guesthouses, an NGO conducting research on whale sharks, and one representative from the North Ari Atoll affiliated with a resort or guesthouse operating within the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa).

Regarding a fee system to generate funds for the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) management, most of the participants (56%) proposed an annual fee for registered establishments, such as guesthouses, resorts, and liveaboards, while 26% suggested a per-user fee for each access. Among those who supported a per-user fee, 66% recommended an amount between 20-30 USD. Additionally, 91% of participants agreed that propeller guards should be mandatory for vessels operating within SAMPa, particularly for whale shark-related activities.

#### **4. Major recommendations from workshop participants**

Participants made several key recommendations to address primary threats such as speeding and vessel strikes which included: implementing repercussions for exceeding speed limits by establishing fines for repeat offenders, increasing awareness among guides and especially captains regarding the existing regulations and guidelines. To manage overcrowding of snorkelers and vessels, participants suggested screening visitors for swimming ability, proper briefing and education prior to excursions, utilizing evening times for excursions and maintaining a 10:1 visitor-to-guide ratio. For vessel strike prevention, participants recommended requiring a special license for boat captains to access the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa), in addition to the license issued by the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation.

Participants also discussed the marketing strategy of whale shark sightings, where the Ministry advocated for a shift away from promises of “100% guaranteed sightings” to encourage sustainable tourism by promoting wildlife encounters as unpredictable encounters. However, participants noted that current marketing by operators already emphasizes a 50/50 chance of whale shark sightings. Additionally, participants recommended allowing up to five boats, excluding the ranger vessel, within the contact zone, with a limit of 12 people per boat to maintain a total of 60 people per encounter. It was also suggested to initially limit the number of vessels rather than individuals and to restrict each encounter to 10–15 minutes per vessel. The need for certified guides, the physical presence of rangers, and stricter enforcement measures were also emphasized. To enhance patrolling efforts and to ensure compliance, participants highlighted the importance of involving the Maldives National



Defence Force (MNDF) during the early monitoring stages. Given that the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) is the largest MPA in the Maldives, it was proposed that patrolling areas be divided and assigned to trained rangers from nearby islands for better enforcement.

It was also suggested that the management plan should include details on how fees collected by the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) will be utilized for the long-term conservation and protection of the MPA. Additional comments for the draft management plan included the need for more rangers and guardians in the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa), the installation of buoys to mark the protected area boundary and allowing only experienced swimmers in the water. Participants emphasized the importance of stricter enforcement to prevent light pollution, specifying regulations for scuba diving and regular snorkelling in the management plan, implementing speeding fines immediately and registered vessels with electronic tracking to monitor speed. Participants also highlighted the importance of involving more stakeholders before finalizing the management plan and assessing the effectiveness of the management plan and regulations over the years.

## **5. Lessons for future workshops and way forward**

Throughout the workshop, participants emphasized the community's awareness of whale sharks, the significance of the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa) and the growing sense of stewardship to protect these gentle giants. The importance of guides submitting citizen science data, the positive attitude of guesthouse operators toward whale shark conservation, the publication of whale shark conservation guidelines, and progress on the draft management plan was also highlighted.

Key lessons for future workshops include increasing efforts to enhance representation and participation from boat captains, the fisheries sector, other local islands in the region, and NGOs. This will help better assess the current resource use of the MPA. Participants also suggested holding more frequent workshops, preferably full-day sessions with extended discussion time, as well as incorporating more online sessions to allow stakeholders to voice their concerns. Additionally, it was also suggested to announce and advertise future workshop registrations well in advance to give stakeholders sufficient time to sign up.

The feedback received from workshop participants has been invaluable in refining the draft management plan. Based on the suggestions and comments gathered during the initial consultation, further amendments will be brought to the current version with guidance and consultation from the advisory committee for the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa). Prior to finalizing the management plan through a series of advisory committee meetings, we also hope to host additional consultation workshops and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with key resource users from the main regions that heavily utilize the South Ari Marine Park (SAMPa), such as Kaafu Atoll, Vaavu Atoll, Alif Alif Atoll to gather more input for the existing draft. The optimistic approach and attitude of the stakeholders offer hope for the successful management of the MPA over time, through trial and error, continuous review and tailoring of the management plan to address the specific needs of this complex MPA.

## Annex 1- Consultation Workshop Participants List

No.	Full Name:	Affiliation:
1	Mariyam Rifqa	La Luna Boutique
2	Mausoom Mohamed	Le innocence
3	Adam Aleef	La Luna Boutique
4	Mohamed Faizan Waheed	Diveoceanus villa park
5	Mohamed Seeneen	Villa Resorts C/O diveOceanus - Villa Park - Villa Haven
6	Mohamed Shah	Bliss Dhigurah
7	Mohamed Ashraf	Bliss Dhigurah
8	Ruth Franklin	Tour Operator
9	Mohamed Aleem Ibrahim	Kuramathi Island Resort
10	Minha Ismail	Student
11	Seb Ainsworth	Boutique beach
12	Sanya Shete	Outrigger Maafushivaru Resort
13	Haisam Ali	Majestic Maldives
14	Mark McMillan	LUX* South Ari Atoll Resort
15	Chiara Rossi	SilverSands
16	Abdulla Shibau	Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve
17	Ahmed Shaan	Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve
18	Ubaidhulla Waseem	Secret Paradise Maldives
19	Mohamed Sharkir	Secret Paradise Maldives
20	Dustin Jann	Euro-Divers LUX* South Ari Atoll
21	Jessica Miller	Ocean at Conrad
22	Anees Mohamed	ADh Dhihdhoo Council
23	Ibrahim Rasheed	ADh Dhangethi Council
24	Mohamed Musthausim Billah	ADh Dhangethi Council
25	Ahmed Mohamed	ADh Fenfushi Council
26	Clara	MWSRP
27	Ali Sifal	SAMPa MoCCEE
28	Ali Gasim	SAMPa MoCCEE
29	Mohamed Moosa	Aquaholics
30	Irthisham Hassan Zareer	MWSRP
31	Ifham Hassan Zareer	MWSRP
32	Hassan Akram	SAMPa MoCCEE
33	Chloe Winn	MWSRP
34	Mohamed Ziyen	MWSRP
35	Naushad	Island Divers
36	Ali Shaheen	Sands Grand
37	Ismail	Island Divers
38	Zimam Athif	MWSRP
39	Wille de bear	Go divers
40	Waie Schulze	Go divers