

MALDIVES WHALE SHARK  
RESEARCH PROGRAMME

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*volunteering*



WWW.MWSRP.ORG / CONSERVATION THROUGH  
RESEARCH & COMMUNITY MOBILISATION /  
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# *introduction*

## *Hello!*

Thank you for taking the time to find out more about the Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme! Over the years volunteers have contributed an enormous amount to the continuing success and progression of our programme.

You will no doubt have been looking at many programmes and projects the world over, and there are many excellent and rewarding experiences out there to be had. It can, however, be hard to figure out which one to go for; which one looks best for you and which one do you think you can have a real positive impact on? This pack is designed to help you make that choice. We are not the most glamorous, the most extreme or the biggest - in fact we have no more than 8 volunteer researchers with us at any one time and often far fewer than that!... but we do provide a fantastic volunteer experience that gets you directly involved with researching and conserving the largest fish in our ocean: the whale shark.

In this pack you will find an honest breakdown of what our Programme is all about. We won't promise you things we can't deliver, but we're not afraid to shout about the great bits, either! You can find out who we are, what we do, and where you can fit into it! From fundraising advice to our research aims... it's all covered here. Have a read, see what you think, and if you like what you see, give us a shout.

We look forward to seeing you out in the water! Anybody seen a shark?!

## THE MWSRP TEAM



# *history + work of the mwsrp*

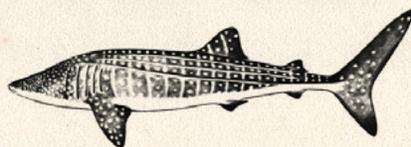
The MWSRP was conceived all the way back in 2006! It was a very different guise to the charity you see today.

Initially, it was an independent research expedition, with the idea of answering some of the basic questions about whale sharks in the Maldives. Basic fundamentals were unknown at that point, such as if there was even a population of whale sharks within the Maldives! Once it was established that the Maldives was indeed a thriving hotspot for the sharks, it also became clear that very little was in place in terms of infrastructure or guidelines to help protect them.

Today, the MWSRP is a registered charity and the leading authority on whale sharks in the Maldives. The pioneering research of the MWSRP into the demography and movements of the whale shark population in the Maldives provides the scientific basis behind the Programme's broader conservation goals, such as answering the major questions of why are the sharks here and where do they go when they leave the Maldives?

One of the MWSRP's most significant achievements has been the key role we have played in the creation of a Marine Protected Area in South Ari Atoll, where the team are based. By working closely with the local island councils and the Maldivian government, the area was assigned its protected status in June 2009 and protects the largest and most consistent aggregation of whale sharks in the Maldives.

The MWSRP has a simple mission statement: 'To conduct whale shark research and foster community-focussed conservation initiatives throughout the Maldives'. This ethos reflects the ongoing commitment not just to the whale sharks, but also to increasing the participation of the local communities in managing this magnificent species.



# *whale sharks in the maldives*

## *Whale Sharks in the Maldives*

For a creature so large, we know incredibly little about it. Some of the key questions still remain unanswered: How many sharks are there in the Maldives? Why do they gather in this particular region? Do they remain in the Maldives or do they travel elsewhere around the world? When and where do they reproduce? The answers to these questions are critical in ensuring the most effective measures are taken to protect the whale shark, not only in the Maldives but throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

Global estimations of whale shark numbers vary depending on which organisation is being quoted, but almost all of them, from the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) to the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature), place the whale shark in the 'vulnerable' category, making the work of organisations such as the our own even more important. The IUCN, in particular, have stated that the global whale shark population could decrease by up to 50 per cent in the next century if measures are not put in place to protect them.

## *Conservation*

There are many factors that contribute to the whale sharks vulnerable status, not all of which we can do anything about. We can however make a mark on the threats posed by illegal finning, collisions with boats, unregulated tourism and the pollution of the coral reef ecosystem. All four of these present a very serious threat to whale shark and it is our job to highlight these issues for decision makers and help mitigate their effects where possible.

A study carried out by the MWSRP indicated that over 67 per cent of the whale sharks within the Maldives have at some point been victim of a boat strike, believed to be the highest frequency in the Indian Ocean.

Whale sharks reproduce very slowly, although the exact gestation period is not yet known. Although a whale shark mother may have a



*INJURED WHALE SHARK*

veritable conveyor belt of offspring, many of these small and defenceless young will not survive to reach sexual maturity and reproduce themselves, after all maturity may not be reached for 30 years! For this reason it is vital that whale sharks are protected, as human interference can have a serious impact on the population's ability to bounce back and it is possible that whale sharks may ultimately disappear from the Maldives one day.

## *Our Research*

The MWSRP are very lucky to have the help of some world renowned marine biologists, and with their help have been building up an on-

going demographic profile of the whale shark population through a non-invasive process called photo identification. Having documented over 3000 encounters with whale sharks the team have identified 208 individuals at the time of writing, and have been able to make some interesting observations;

**1** Firstly, all of the sharks within the Maldives appear to be adolescent (that is to say pre-reproductive age) and they are almost all male. Only 9 of the 208 whale sharks we have encountered are female, though the reasons for such a sex imbalance are yet to be understood.

**2** Secondly, the number of sightings compared to the number of identified sharks tells us that the same sharks are repeatedly coming back to the reef time and again. We are looking into several research techniques to help us establish why this may be, including plankton studies, hydrographical work on sea temperature and bottom contour mapping.

By collaborating with centres such as the Hubbs Sea World Institute in San Diego, California, we have also been able to take part in ground-breaking satellite tagging and DNA analysis programmes. This gives us access to essential information to help answer some of the questions about the population dynamics of this species and provides researchers all over the world with an insight into the local, regional and trans – Indian Ocean movements of the whale sharks that aggregate in South Ari Atoll.

Other research by the MWSRP has focussed on accurately measuring the sharks that we are seeing. As we have a population containing individuals which we encounter regularly year after year, we are almost uniquely placed to comment on growth rates of whale sharks in their natural environment. Accurately measuring a shark is harder than it sounds; they don't hang around to make it easy for you!

We are always looking to include the tourism sector in our research and like to look out for our sharks. So recently we completed an accreditation scheme to suggest guidelines, similar to those used in other areas such as Western Australia, on whale shark encounters to prevent overcrowding and 'best practice' recommendations for tour operators and resorts. We are proud to announce that with assistance from The Travel Foundation, this course is now the official government accreditation scheme for whale shark watching operators in Mexico, home to the famous Yucatan Peninsula aggregations! We hope to soon have it as the de facto guideline in the Maldives also, and in association with the IUCN, have all the resorts in this region actively contributing data from their encounters toward the conservation of Maldivian whale sharks via our 'Big Fish Network' portal.

A major goal of the MWSRP is to assist in further developing the management plan of the South Ari Marine Protected Area (SAMPA), preserving



*RICHARD REES MEASURING THE WHALE SHARK*

a globally significant aggregation site for the whale shark. Furthermore we wish to engage the local communities in our work - and have already begun a Maldivian volunteer internship programme - so that one day the Programme can be Maldivian-run.

# *the volunteer experience*

So now you know a bit more about what we do and who we are, it's time to put YOU in the picture! There are three areas we think you'll want to know about. Firstly, what makes the MWSRP unique, and therefore worthy of your time and energy as a volunteer? Secondly, what kind of activities will you be involved in? And thirdly, what do other people have to say about the Programme? By the end of this section, you should have answers to all three of them!

## *time on the boat!*

We are very proud to say that we spend a lot of time simply out on the water looking for sharks! As with any research group, gathering hard data is at the core of our work, and there's only one way we can spot sharks, and that's the old fashioned way of getting out there and looking! There are days when we might see 6 sharks in half an hour, and sometimes we only see one all day, but the unpredictability all adds to the excitement!

## *community outreach*

A massive part of what we do involves working with the local community. We spend as much time as we can talking to locals, learning from their experience. Unlike other programmes which might shield you away from local culture, we invite you to make the most of a fascinating and diverse nation and experience a life very different from our own.

## *globally significant whale shark population*

We are very lucky to have a probable unique year-round population of whale sharks. Nowhere else in the world boasts whale sharks every single month of the year, and furthermore many of the sharks we see are the same individuals time after time. You might even get to recognise some of them!

## *what makes the mwsrp unique?*

## *research participation*

We do not side-line volunteers into 'bit-part' roles, but instead offer you the chance to get stuck in with every aspect of what we do, from measuring sharks in the water to taking I.D shots and helping us record our data. You can really become a valuable asset to our work in the time you spend with us, and in doing so helping to conserve whale sharks and their marine habitat.

## *and finally...you!*

We do not choose volunteers on the basis of their qualifications, but on their enthusiasm, willingness and passion for shark conservation. Volunteers bring their own unique ideas and skills to the table, and we are always happy to listen to new ideas or try a fresh approach to something. Speak up and be heard!



RIFAAE RASHEED RELAXING WITH STUDENTS FROM A LOCAL SCHOOL TEAM ON MARINE DISCOVERY DAY

# *the volunteer experience*



# activities

As a volunteer, you can expect to be involved in an array of exciting and rewarding challenges. As mentioned above, we invite you to really get hands on with the research, but that's not all we do...

## *days on the water*



Perhaps the most common activity will be actually being out on the water looking for sharks. It can be hard, hot work, but the more eyes we have on the water, the better our chances of success. We travel around on our dhoni, a traditional Maldivian boat, and from the roof we have a good vantage point from which to spot sharks. We also record any other significant marine species we see, from turtles to mantas and dolphins, so there's never a dull moment.

Once we spot a shark, it's all systems go! We have to identify the shark if we can, which means taking a left and right sided picture, from which we look at the unique spot pattern later. Those with good lungs may be asked to 'sex' the shark, which means swimming underneath and having a good look! Finally, if there's time, we try to measure the shark, either with a line or with our laser measurement device. Noticing new scars and other distinguishing marks can be really important in recording the health of the population too, so keep those eyes peeled!

## *working with the local community*

We often take local school groups out onto the water with us, or give a presentation to a class. Our volunteers often find they end up sharing so much information about whale sharks that they can give whole presentations on them!

We may also be involved with a local initiative to improve the understanding of whale sharks and the Marine Protected Area for the people who live here. In June 2012 we held a 'Marine Discover Day' for the pupils of schools whose islands are within the MPA, with our volunteers involved in every step; from designing and then running with the pupils through a 'Ecosystem Treasure Hunt', presentations and craft projects. Then in 2013 we held the First Annual WS Festival, staging creative workshops during which year 10 pupils learned about whale shark biology, ecology and conservation. It was a fantastic event where school children and islanders from all over South Ari atoll gathered on Dhigurah. Rubbish is a major problem in the Maldives, and although a beach sweep doesn't sound much fun, it is actually very satisfying, and makes a big difference to everybody on the island so we often hold half day beach cleans. We even made a giant model of a whale shark out of old plastic bottles to highlight this plastic problem!



## *data entry days*

As an active research programme, we also have to collate all the data and encounters we log whilst out on the water for presentation to policy and decision makers. Volunteers can help us to bring all this info together and input into our database, and then identify individual sharks themselves. Spotting a shark, swimming with it and then identifying and monitoring it is a really rewarding process! Often volunteers want to ID the sharks we've seen before we're even back on land! We upload all our encounters onto our online portal as well as contributing to our Big Fish Network.



# Big Fish Network

You may also be able to use your own skills to help us; from accountants to web designers to graphic designers, we've had lots of help from our volunteers who in turn love to use their experience to assist us. We're an ever changing programme, and as a volunteer you can really be part of it.



# *what do our past volunteers say?*

*we asked a few of them for their thoughts!*

## *SuYee Tong*

“I joined the MWSRP for two weeks without realizing how hard it might be for a city kid to help out with the program but I’m still so glad I went anyway. Being in the Maldives for two weeks was an eye opener - I got to meet people who were very passionate about marine biology and conservation (both staff and volunteers alike) and got to help first hand with the data collection. The staff at the MWSRP were welcoming to us volunteers and I learnt a lot more about the marine ecosystem in the Maldives, and how tourists can get to experience the beauty of the ocean while helping conservation in one way or another. Whale sharks are beautiful creatures, and I’m glad I got to experience encounters up close - it was an intimidating but unforgettable experience. I’d say that whoever wants to volunteer with the MWSRP should come with an open mind and heart, and you’ll definitely be able to play a part in supporting this program and making a difference, while getting to meet whale sharks. Thanks for the experience MWSRP! It was truly unforgettable.”



## *Jacob Salmonsén*

“Being a wildlife fanatic, I came to the Maldives with a sheer desire to see whale sharks. Had I known what the following month would bring while waiting in the airport I probably would have stood there with an uncontrollable grin on my face. I also would have put on flip-flops instead of shoes. The MWSRP does everything with humble and respectful approach. By reaching out to local communities and being ambitious with day-to-day operations as well as future projects, there is a strong mentality among staff members that immediately affects you as a volunteer. It makes you eager to do work. Sweeping the reef for sharks and swimming with them proved itself to be an addicting cocktail for me. Not only are you in beautiful surroundings but getting in the water with a shark just never gets old. It makes the day every time. I have learned a lot about whale sharks and a great deal of other things too but that is something one will have to experience for oneself. Volunteering is really what you choose to make of it in the sense that you have the opportunity to make the trip unforgettable. It takes effort but the sharks will do their part for sure.”

## *Jaymin Shah*

“My time in Maldives was incredible, and the programme was all I could have hoped for and more. Personally, I love being out at sea and this was great as we spent most of the day out at the reef looking for sharks. It was amazing to have such close and frequent encounters with whale sharks. You can only truly comprehend how big they are when you are right next to them in the water. On average we would see 3 sharks a day but some days we could end up seeing 4 sharks in 30 minutes! Whilst I was there I also got to help out at a school on an island called Fenushee. This was nice as I was able to teach some of the children to swim and also interact with the local community. I was lucky enough to work with such a nice team who are passionate about the research and are happy to share their knowledge with you. This definitely has to be one of the best experiences I have ever done!”

## *Beate Baier*

“It was such a great and wonderful time with the team, with you and you do such an outstanding work! Thank you so much that I could participate, it made me so happy! I still believe in paradise. But now at least I know it’s not some place you can look for, because it’s not where you go. It’s how you feel for a moment when you’re part of something, and if you find that moment... it lasts forever...”

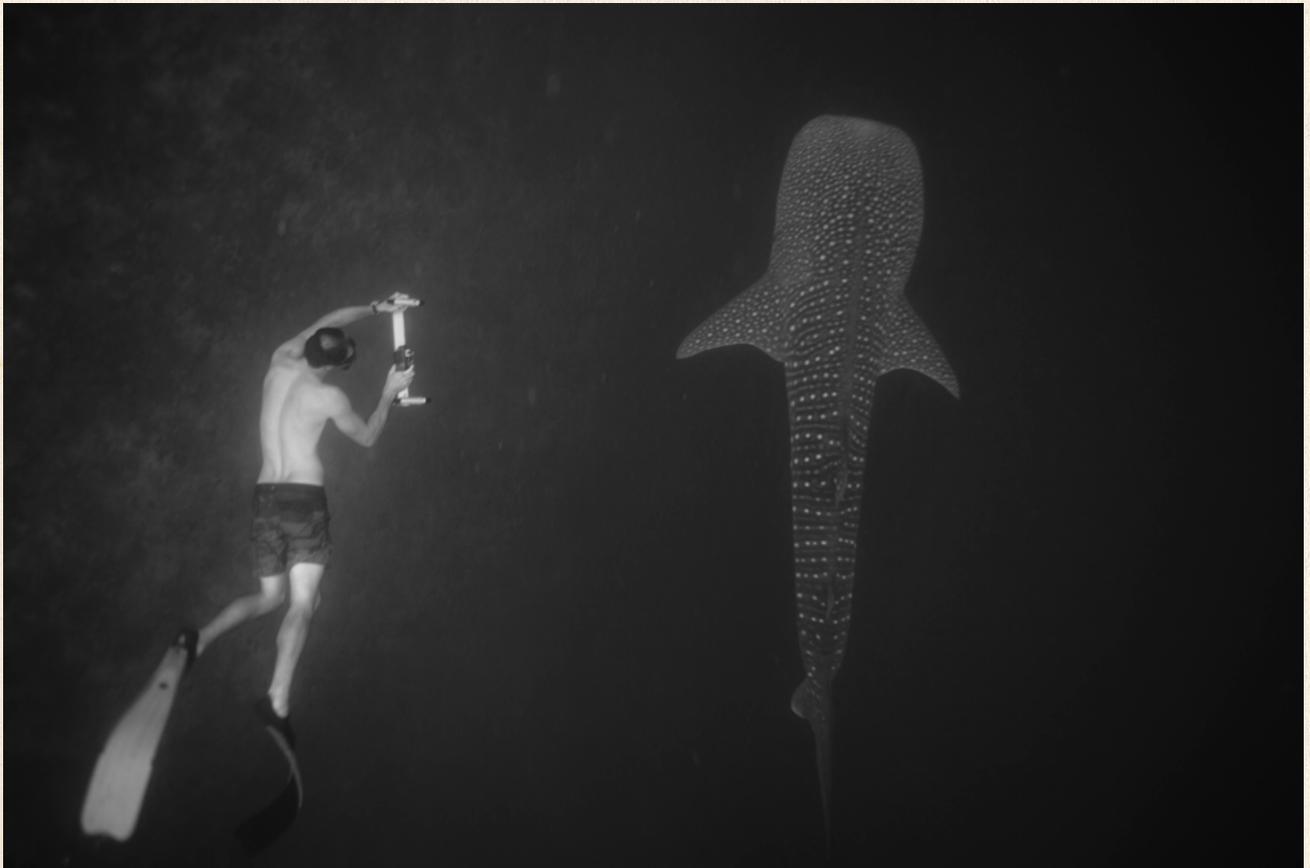
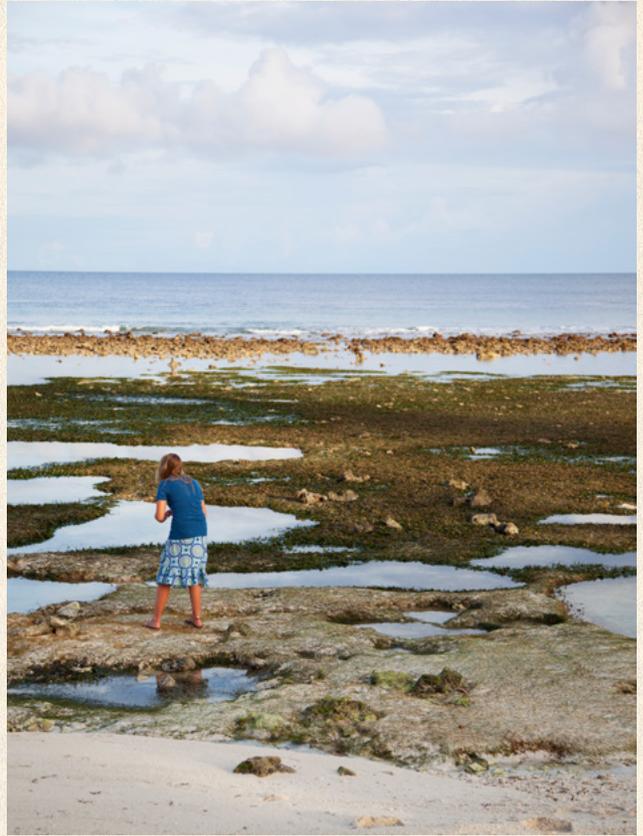


## *Pauline Berra*

“Hi everyone! I m Pauline from Switzerland! Last winter I went to the Maldives to spent 2 extraordinary weeks in one of the most beautiful place I’ve ever been to... As a biologist student, I wanted to “go on the field” instead of sitting in class all day... well, I was served: spotting and swimming next to these giant sharks will definitely remain one of the best memories of my journey! We also had the chance to see mantas, dolphins, turtles ... almost everyday. If you are an animal lover, this is definitely a great project to get involved in. A part from the wildlife-side, I also had great times with my friends and people I met there... Maldivian people are really nice and their food too! Big thanks to my friends and the MWSRP staff for making this trip so unforgettable :)”

## *Janet Buckly*

“If you ever thought of doing something different, are interested in the protection of marine life and don’t mind working while you holiday then volunteering with this programme will bring rewards you usually only get to dream of. It’s not really work though; it’s an experience that you’ll never forget in one of the most beautiful places in the world. It humbles you and makes you realise that life is fragile and beautiful, I cannot agree more with that Globetrekker; “Everyone should swim with a whale shark once in their lifetime”!”



# *your fundraising & our use of your donation*

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In order to keep the programme running, we ask that you make a donation to cover the costs of your stay and the operation of the charity. In hard financial times such as these, we understand it can be tough to raise the money yourself, but never fear... help is at hand! As we are a fully registered charity, you can use a wide variety of ingenious fundraising activities to make the whole process a bit easier! In the past we've had volunteers make and sell t-shirts, run marathons and host charity dinners in order to raise the donation.

On our website we have compiled a bunch of other fun ideas for fundraising activities that can pave your way to the Maldives.

However you decide to raise money for this once-in-a-lifetime experience, the good news is that the MWSRP is now registered for gift aid, so if you donate, the UK Government will add 28% to your donation! You may also be able to reclaim some tax yourself after your research period.

## *cost of volunteering with the mwsrp*

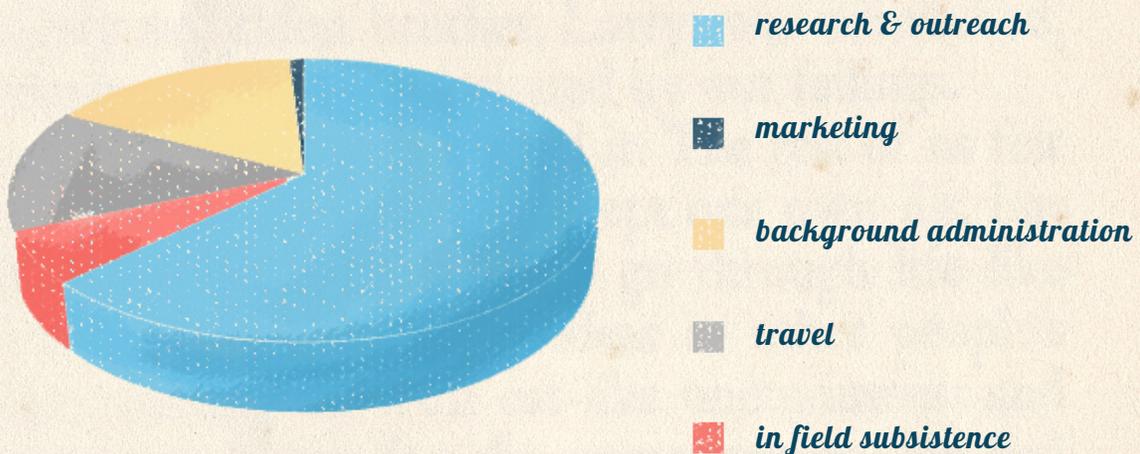
In order for the MWSRP to continue its vital research, we require all overseas volunteers to make a financial contribution to cover the expenses incurred during their stay. The donations required to cover your living costs are detailed on our website, which you can access through the following link, <http://maldiveswhalesharkresearch.org/volunteer>.

\*Please note, contribution covers infield accommodation, subsistence and MWSRP activities. It does not include international or domestic flights, or any additional time in country beyond your agreed stay with us. Internal return domestic flights are chargeable at an additional price regardless of volunteering duration. For the 2014 season this is £180, but please note that this may be subject to last minute change and will be advised at your time of booking.

## *what happens to the money I donate?*

The Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme is a completely not-for-profit charity. All donations go toward our goals in the field, our volunteer programme and some towards the very modest running costs of the charity! We do however operate in one of the more remote and ever more 'exclusive' parts of the world, so your donation is essential in providing the resources we need for even the most basic aspects of conducting our research, such as obtaining equipment and moving about! Below is a rough breakdown of the main areas of our expenditure in the 2012 / 2013 financial year.

### *mwsrp % distribution of expenditure 2012 / 2013*



# faq

Whether you are a seasoned traveller or taking your first leap out into the world at large, you are bound to have some questions on where you are going, what to expect, logistical challenges and who you would be sharing this experience with. Below are some brief answers to our most commonly asked questions, but we will always be on hand to answer others that are not listed here and will share information more specific to your trip with us once you are a little further down the reservation process.

## ***So who joins the MWSRP as a Volunteer Researcher?***

Anyone and everyone over the age of 18 and with a passion for conservation and a willingness to roll up their sleeves, get stuck in and do something about it. Many of our volunteers are professionals who are over the nine-to-five and have some time off coming up and want to do more with it than just sit on a beach. Doctors, lawyers, IT consultants and gap year students have all come out with us, each bringing their own skills and ideas to our Programme. Any one group of volunteers is often an eclectic mix of ages and nationalities; we once had 5 volunteers from 5 different countries ranging from 19 to 69!

## ***If I come out, am I going to be doing 1 persons work with 45 others?***

Absolutely not. Should you decide to come out with us, stand by to be busy! We have a maximum of 8 places available, and often less than this depending on the season. If you are selected to join us, then you will become a part of the research team. From there it's up to you; we need help to get all we monitor done in the time we have to do it, so we have a minimum requirement of work we need you to do, but if you are willing to put more in, then you will definitely get more out of the trip

## ***Can anyone come out or do I have to do some kind of a test to join you?***

We do have an application process and an application form but don't stress! This just has some basic questions on competencies and qualifications, as well as some which outline your aims for the trip and what you feel you can contribute. It is a completely non-discriminatory enquiry, which only comes into use in periods where we have very high interest in places. As mentioned earlier, we have very limited spaces, so at times it may be that we have to select the person with the skills or competencies which best fits with our needs for that particular period. If it is not you at that time, then by all means check for another time or duration, or drop us an email to discuss.

## ***Do I need to be able to swim like a fish to join you?!***

Well not like a fish, but perhaps Michael Phelps... No, as long as you are comfortable and safe in water which is too deep to stand up in, then we can work on getting you to a level of competency in snorkelling and duck diving where you will be able to keep up with the sharks and help us in our research.

### ***1 have a disability that affects my mobility, can I still come out?***

It should be noted that because of the nature of the animal we study, we do spend a lot of time at and in the sea, which involves rapid water entries, a lot of swimming with equipment and climbing ladders back onto boats. But there are many aspects to this work and not all of them are as physical. Drop us an email or give us a bell and we'd love to find a way that you can help us in our research that fits in to your level of mobility.

### ***Where do we stay & operate from?***

We live on a local island called Dhigurah – literally meaning 'long island' in Divehi. Accommodation is in a guest house and rooms are on a shared basis of two people. We have 4 rooms so we can have up to 8 volunteers at a time. Dhigurah will be your home and being a local island you can get involved with the community – there may be opportunities for you to go to a local house for some traditional food, go on a fishing trip or have a look at some local arts and crafts in the gift shops. There's also a café and a dive centre if you're a keen diver you can book onto some trips with them.

### ***What do I do on a day off?***

Anything you like! If you're a keen diver you can go on some trips with the local dive centre – Island Divers. TME, the guest house also offer some other excursions - water sports, fishing, snorkelling. There are gift shops on the island so you can simply relax on the beach & read a book. Please note that you will have to pay for the excursions or diving separately.

### ***Will I get some kind of qualification from this trip?***

There is no official accreditation from volunteering with us. You may be able to get a dive qualification – you have 1 day off a week, so if you wanted to do the final dive sections of a PADI Open Water Course then you may have time, but you will have to pay for and sort that yourself with the dive centre on the resort. Like any volunteer programme, what it lacks in official qualifications it makes up for on a C.V. by showing that are someone who is willing to get off their butt and do something, try new experiences and learn new skills.



# *next steps + progressing with your application*

Hopefully this resource has whetted your appetite and satisfied any questions or concerns you may have had about volunteering with the MWSRP. So should you have decided that it is for you, the next step is to get back in contact with the Volunteer Coordinator ([volunteer@maldiveswhalesharkresearch.org](mailto:volunteer@maldiveswhalesharkresearch.org)) and let us know that you are interested. We will then send you our application form, that you should complete honestly, and from there will walk you through every step of the reservation and donation process, help you with any advice on flights and transfers and provide you with a pack containing detailed information on what you will need to bring, logistical items etc.; basically we'll guide you right up to the point we meet you on Dhigurah!

We would like to thank you for taking the time to get to know us, our research and our area of operations a little better and make ourselves available for any further questions you may have. We hope to see you out there sometime, but in the mean-time leave you to day dream of Maldivian beaches, crystal clear coral seas and long swims with big spotty fish!

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