Benefits for coral reefs, resorts, visitors and the people

Resorts implementing environmental best practices to protect coral reefs will see the paybacks of a cleaner and healthier environment leading to increased guest satisfaction. Healthy reefs are also more likely to withstand periodic rapid increases in sea surface temperatures made more intense and frequent by ongoing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and keep hosting a rich variety of species.

Applying best reef management practices as the resort’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) satisfies legal mandates and increases visibility of the resort’s environmental policies and efforts at all levels.

An award scheme for successful resort management of marine areas endorsed by the government can help market the resort’s environmental stewardship towards an increasingly growing eco-aware clientele at international level.

In addition, effectively managed protected areas typically lead to more abundance of fish and fish sizes to the reef, which will not only attract more guests, but also positively influence surrounding marine regions. Beyond the limits of marine managed areas, fishers of local communities will equally profit from a proliferation of fish biomass, their source of income. These mutual and visible benefits for both resorts and communities allow for a parallel sustainable development and growth, building social resilience and strengthening ties.

For the Maldives, a network of effectively managed marine areas means an insurance policy for the future, both for marine life and the people who depend on the goods and services that coral reefs provide.

Approaching a tailor-made resort reef management plan for North Ari

It should take six to eight months to create a house reef management plan including underwater surveys, mapping, assessment of resort operations and activities, identifying and implementing the marine environmental best practices, and developing a house reef zoning plan in consultation with the resort.

Cooperation from the resort management is expected as hosts with lodging, food and beverages and supporting logistics. The specifics of which activities would be permissible, and the reporting and monitoring obligations are now under development. However, with the commitment of the resorts, the endorsement of the government and the participation of local communities, MMAs will ensure that environmental considerations are prevalent and resources protected, with resorts, guests and communities positively impacted with tangible benefits for the whole region.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) offers the undertakings for North Ari resorts free of charge. The resort, the government and IUCN will take part in the process of developing the North Ari Marine Managed Areas (MMAs).

www.maldivesconservationportal.org and www.iucn.org/marine

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The importance of healthy reefs for the economy

The Maldives’ physical integrity and economy largely depend on coral reefs which are the commercial basis for tourism and fishing. Not only that, coral reefs defend shorelines from erosion, safeguard critical infrastructures, and provide crucial habitats for fish and other marine life. They also ensure food supply, guest satisfaction and return visits. Coral reefs are, however, highly threatened by climate change and impacts from different man-related sources.

Follow a Monitoring Programme

Regular monitoring of the house reef is essential to develop pro-active and adaptive marine management strategies in answer to resort activities. A national initiative, the National Coral Reef Monitoring Framework (NCRMF), is currently being developed to standardize monitoring protocols for resorts and other stakeholders to collect data on fish assemblages and coral reef communities. The information obtained will help resorts identify stressors to be counteracted before permanent damage is done and report to the government on trends for better informed decisions at a national level.

A varied management scenario to protect diverse marine resources

The Maldives have different options for effective protection. Government-managed Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) can be accompanied by resort-led Marine Managed Areas (MMAs) and Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs) involving the local population; all supported by the government. MPAs, MMAs, and LMMAs can act as a network of core zones of protection for fish and coral growth, dispersal and settlement, also helping to counteract the impacts of climate change and maintain a healthy ecosystem. Poorly managed or unhealthy coral reefs are susceptible to stress and vulnerable to coral bleaching and mortality, and the fatal implications for other marine species depending on the reef.

Ingredients for a successful resort-managed area

Tailor a House Reef Management Plan

Resort operations and activities impact their surroundings in a number of ways, often unnoticed e.g. pollution from the sewage treatment plant, sedimentation from sand pumping, mechanical damage, etc. A customized house reef management plan identifies these stressors and provides best practice suggestions to reduce them to a minimum. It assesses the health of the house reef, recognizes risk areas and those with high ecological values, and suggests a zoning plan to better manage marine resources.

Employ a Marine Environmental Officer

Many resorts use marine biologists to increase guest awareness and experience. With their help, resorts can become environmental stewards, impersonating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and using their skills to conduct activities for the House Reef Management Plan. A Resort Marine Environmental Officer can:

- Reinforce a resort’s operation policy for environmental best practices.
- Monitor the house reef regularly to identify stressors and trends.
- Develop and deliver marine education programmes for staff and local communities to increase awareness.
- Interact to improve guests’ environmental behaviour and experience, involving them in monitoring efforts.
- Assist teachers deliver lessons and hold presentations for the wider public on environmental and marine topics.

What can resorts do to protect their assets?

By adopting environmental best practices through a reef management plan, resorts can:

- increase the house reef’s health and resilience i.e. the ability of the system to recover from stress caused by climate change and resort operations
- support their country by contributing to a network of effectively managed marine areas
- turn into conservation leaders at international level

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Reach out to the Community

Resorts and local communities depend on each other, yet the relationship is often strained. Strengthening their ties can lead to greater environmental effectiveness and mutual economic benefits. Resort visits by local islanders (schools, fishers, …) to learn best practices is an active way to involve them in reef management.