



A trainee practices releasing a sailfish.

Saving paradise one fish at a time

By Victoria Childs

The trainer, Mike Tan, calls out instructions as the crew gather around the sportfishing boat's fighting chair, eagerly taking turns to reel. The wind out on the open water roars, and waves crash against the side of the boat in colours reminiscent of a bartender's libations: Blue Curacao, Crème de Menthe and perhaps a splash of Peppermint Schnapps.

The massive sailfish is brought alongside the boat, and Mike and Rasheed (a local crew member) throw themselves flat on the boat deck to lean down and take hold of the bill, while another Maldivian, Dhona, leans forward watching intently. Following Mike's instructions, Rasheed uses a pair of pliers to remove the hook then takes hold of the bill, diligently keeping the mouth in the water and maneuvering the head to revive the fish.

"Boat forward," Mike calls to Captain Yusoof and the powerful boat revs and surges forward. Water gushes into the gills of the sailfish bringing much needed oxygen, and its tail is soon twitching. "Someone time, five minutes," says Mike, while the crew takes turns getting a feel for reviving the fish. Dhona calls encouragement: "Come on fish!" and they all laugh good-naturedly.

Just a few weeks ago this same crew – from Baros Maldives, a luxury resort – was hauling billfish out of the water for guests to take

PHOTO: MIKE TAN

interminable trophy shots, before dumping the fish unceremoniously over the side of the boat. Often they then watched as it turned belly up and floated away, or sank lifelessly beneath the waves.

Ms. Magali Marion, the resort's resident marine biologist says that while many resorts list gamefishing as a guest activity and claim to practice catch and release, the local crew often have no knowledge of the proper revival techniques, resulting in high mortality rates of precious pelagic fish. After deciding that formal training was needed, she approached Mike, of Bluesails Sportfishing, a charter business based in Singapore, to design a programme that would provide the local crew with the necessary knowledge and techniques for sensitive and sustainable big-game fishing.

Mike acknowledges that gamefishing and conservation can be seen as contradictory but notes that with proper tagging, release and documentation, the information gathered can help scientists preserve the species.

"People who never cared about billfish, often get passionate about their preservation after a personal experience on a gamefishing boat," says Mike, adding that big-game fishing can also turn around the senseless killing of these species by local fisherman who come to realise the fish are worth much more alive (through fishing charters) than chopped up in a local fish market.

Staff from Soneva Fushi have also been through this catch and release training, while other resorts including Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru, Angsana Velavaru and Ihuru have started addressing similar conservation issues. Marine centres, resident marine biologists and initiatives such as reef regeneration and coral transplant programmes are sprouting across the island nation. Many also highlight the protection of endangered species such as the Napoleon Wrasse, sea turtles, whale sharks and manta rays.

These resorts know that in the Maldives, the real wealth lies beneath the waves: rich fishing grounds and stunning coral-encrusted reefs. Tourism and fishing are the mainstays of the Maldivian economy and together account for 40% of GDP and more than a third of total employment.

The fragility of these jewel-like islands is well documented. No island is more than 3m above sea level and as early as 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that a rise of only 25cm in relative sea level would render the Maldives uninhabitable. The IPCC Fourth Assessment Report of 2007 reported that the country shows a rising sea-level trend of 4mm per year on average –meaning a rise of 40cm and oblivion by the end of the century.

The Maldives' vulnerability to the vagaries of sudden storms and ocean currents has been vividly illustrated by the appearance of entire islands overnight: Aahura in Shaviyani Atoll appeared in 1955 following a storm that swept through the northern atolls and Udhafushi was formed during a storm in 1987.

Marine conservation on the part of the resorts is a win-win situation of course. Guests rendered speechless by the breathtaking sights of the islands go away both enlightened and relieved to know that the resorts care about preserving that environment; the local staff are encouraged to feel that their home is valued by their employers, and most importantly, a fragile environment is preserved and protected.

PHOTO: BANYAN TREE HOTELS & RESORTS

At Baros Maldives, coral propagation workshops and a reef regeneration program aim to enhance the natural house reef. They are also the only resort in the Maldives partnering with Reef Check, an international non-profit organization that monitors, restores and maintains coral reefs. They do this through a global network of volunteers trained to monitor and report on reef health, facilitate ecologically sound and economically sustainable solutions, and stimulate the local community to protect and rehabilitate damaged reefs.

In the Maldives, the Reef Check program is overseen by Ronny and Karin Spijker, a couple from the Netherlands with over 15 years experience in the Maldives. Working from their base at the Marine Centre at Baros, Ronny together with the marine biologist, Magali Marion, actively monitors reefs in the North Male Atoll for Reef Check.

Ronny and Karin have also adapted elements of the Reef Check program to be a little less scientific and more accessible so that guests at the resort can participate and learn how to monitor the health of a reef according to the



Banyan Tree Vabbinfaru has also worked with Reef Check to survey corals.

Fact file

Area: 90,000sqkm (with only 300sqkm of land!)

Islands: 1,190 in 26 atolls

Population: 396,000 (2010 estimate)

Time zone: GMT +5

standards of internationally recognised programs like Reef Check.

“We saw a chance to make an interesting activity out of the Reef Check program and offer guests a valuable experience, helping to conserve the reefs for future generations,” says Karin.

Another marine conservation initiative that a number of resorts participated in was the banning of shark fishing in 2009.

Globally, more than 100 million sharks are killed annually, mostly to meet the demand for shark fin soup in East Asia. In the Maldives, the number of sharks deliberately killed for their fins, and to a lesser extent their meat and oil, resulted in a severe decline in the number of shark sightings.

Ronny remembers the frustration of dive centres at the time, seeing fewer and fewer sharks, and even finding dead sharks with their fins chopped off during dives.

Says Magali Marion: “Conservation is either top down or bottom up. In the Maldives, it is usually bottom up,” meaning that initiatives often start in the resorts then awareness spreads, eventually reaching government level.

In the case of shark fin, all six resorts in Baa Atoll: Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru, Reethi Beach, Kihaadhuffaru, Royal Island, Soneva Fushi and Coco Palm Dhuni Kolhu formed a working group to target the issue, among other environmental problems.

Together with local activists and international conservation groups, the resorts sent out emails and letters to nearly 90 other resorts, 70 dive centres, 300 local travel agents and tour operators worldwide. Many signed a ‘save-the-sharks’ letter and sent it to the government. Soneva Fushi also printed leaflets, funded a TV campaign educating local fisherman on the effects of shark fishing, and initiated discussions with local authorities and the

government itself to highlight the detrimental effects of shark fishing on ecosystems, as well as on the tourism and fishing industries of the Maldives.

The efforts of the resorts were rewarded on March 5, 2009, when the Maldivian government announced a complete ban on all shark fishing within the country’s atolls and lagoons, and in waters up to 12 miles off the Maldivian coast. A year later the ban was extended to all of the country’s territorial waters.

Since the ban, Ronny and Karin have noticed an increase in both black and white tip sharks. Data is collected and recorded on a daily basis and then sent to the Marine Research Center in Male.

But despite all these efforts, more remains to be done. Reef fish such as grouper and snapper often appear on hotel menus, and some resorts increase the impact on their numbers by offering a ‘night’ fishing activity to guests. This usually takes place at dusk when the fish become more active and therefore easier to catch, especially as, like socialising teenagers, many reef species have their favourite ‘hang-outs’ easily discovered by the resort’s boats. Pressure on fish stocks can quickly mount, and it is presently the resorts themselves who decide what the catch limit for each species should be and whether to make it strictly a catch and release activity or not.

As for the locals, in the past, they never ate reef fish; their main diet was skipjack tuna. But now they too are getting a taste for more colourful species and so the involvement of the local population is becoming crucial to the country’s efforts to control its impacts on the surrounding ocean.

The Baros catch and release training programme shows that conservation efforts can quickly have a big impact. One week of classroom presentations and lots of practical experience taught the resort’s staff the

proper techniques for sustainable big-game fishing. But perhaps the most important outcome was how this changed their mindset.

At the end of the training, Mike Tan takes each crew out again, this time to observe only, to see that they can apply what they have learnt.

Dhona, Rasheed and friends now know what to do: how to revive a sailfish, when it is ready to be released. They point out to each other as the tail begins moving, the fish is ready. Dhona pushes the head down, releases the bill and watches as the fish heads down into the sapphire water, swaying with increasing power as it realises it is free once more.

“Goodbye fish!” someone calls.

A cheer goes up and high-fives are exchanged. The confidence is there, the commitment is there.

“I am really proud of them,” says Mike Tan. “They did a good job. Excellent.”

Mission accomplished. Now for the rest of the country . . . [△△](#)



Careful hook removal raises the fish’s chances of survival. The cloth under the fish helps preserve the coating on its scales that deters parasites.