



P R E S S   R E L E A S E - 1 8   J a n u a r y   2 0 1 9

## **South Ari Atoll – one of the best places to see the biggest smile on Earth!**

The whale shark is the largest and heaviest fish ever seen in our oceans, and its existence dates back to more than 65 million years. Yet, we still know very little about these mysterious gentle giants.

Despite the broad distribution of whale sharks in tropical and subtropical areas of the globe, there are only about 20 locations where regular sightings of these creatures have been reported in coastal areas, including the Maldives, South Africa, Mozambique, Mexico, Belize and Australia, and the majority of these locations represent seasonal “feeding aggregations” for whale sharks, which are seen only for a few months each year.

In contrast, whale sharks are year-round residents of South Ari Atoll in the Maldives, which is a Marine Protected Area (SAMPA), making this a very special place. Maafushivaru is blessed to be located in such a unique part of this beautiful island nation indeed. Snorkelers and divers are frequently surprised by the colossal and magical presence of this iconic species, with the vast majority of encounters happening very close to the surface.

There are a few global facts we know about whale sharks. They are gentle, slow-moving filter feeders, feeding mainly on zooplankton, and the largest on record was reportedly 20 meters in length with a mouth that can be up to 1.5 meters wide! They can live up to 100 years, and interestingly enough, each individual whale shark has a unique pattern of spots and stripes, much like a human fingerprint, which can be used to identify it.

Out of the over 9700 whale sharks identified in the global whale shark database, around 2/3 are juvenile males. Sightings of females and adults of both sexes (and babies) are very rare. Very little is also known about their reproduction and life history, and no one has yet seen a whale shark mating or giving birth! While we still lack information about the global whale shark population, the species is considered endangered, having suffered a population decline of more than 50% in the past three generations according to International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).



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At Maafushivaru, we collaborate with the Maldivian Whale Shark Research Project (MWSRP), a non-profit organization, which carries out whale shark research to understand their population dynamics in the Maldives.

Every time we bring our guests snorkelling or diving with whale sharks, we submit ID photos and sighting data to the MWSRP. This means everyone can participate as a “citizen scientist” and help with the global conservation of this threatened species! These collaborations have allowed the MWSRP to identify 391 whale sharks in the Maldives, of which 86.2% are juvenile males. In addition, the data indicates that re-sightings of individual whale sharks at SAMPA are very high and over long periods of time. For example, the individual whale shark WSo71 has been seen 238 times in 10 years. Therefore, SAMPA appears to offer a critical habitat and a global significant aggregation of whale sharks in the pre-mature stage, which shows no seasonality.

In the last couple of months, we have had 10 incredible encounters with whale sharks in South Ari Atoll, including a few re-sightings, during our snorkelling and diving safaris. We were also very lucky to identify a new juvenile male, which had not been previously registered in the MWSRP database! His name is “Javaahiru” (*jewel* in the local language Dhivehi) and we have seen it twice in two months!

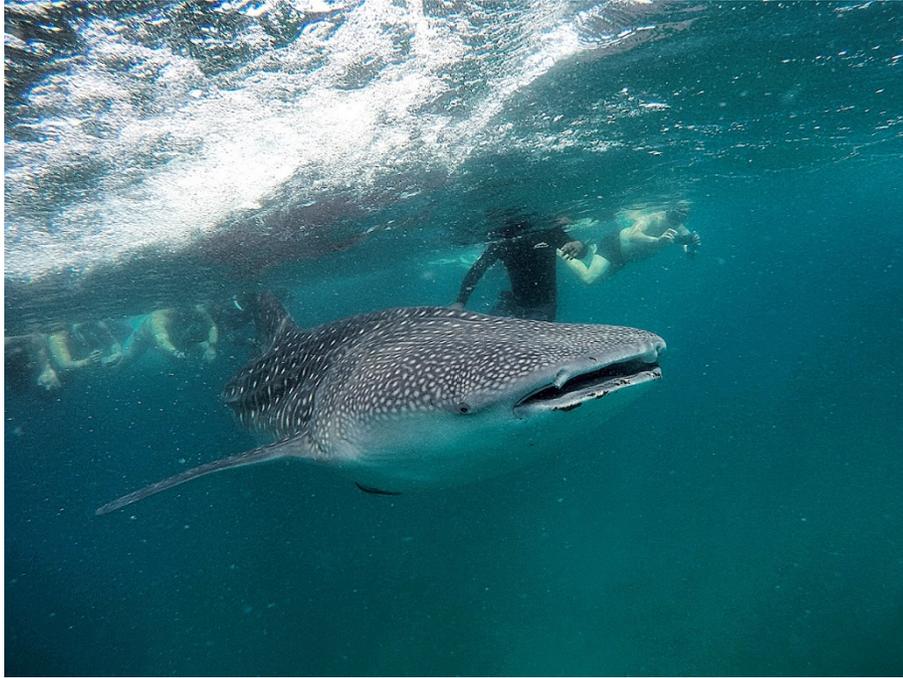
Diving and snorkelling with these gentle giants is not only a truly breath-taking experience but also a unique opportunity to contribute to the much needed conservation of these amazing creatures!



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**Note to Editors:**

Maafushivaru Maldives is a typical island epitomizing all the one dreams of when thinking of the Maldives. With its small island charm, lush vegetation surrounded by the white beaches and a house reef that provides an enchanting snorkelling experience. The island is just over 500 metres in length and even has its own baby island, Lonubo, just 5 minutes away. Lonubo is exclusively for the use of Maafushivaru guests and a holiday on Maafushivaru will not be complete without at least one visit to this beautiful deserted islet.

Refurbished in 2010, the resort is managed by Universal Resorts.

Bookings for Maafushivaru can be made through Maafushivaru website [www.maafushivaru.com](http://www.maafushivaru.com)

**Note to Picture Editors:**

Images of Maafushivaru can be viewed via the website [www.maafushivaru.com](http://www.maafushivaru.com)

High resolution images are available for download at:

<http://www.universalmagesonline.com/maafushivaru/index.html>

For any further information, please contact:

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