

# BLUE & GREEN LAAMU

*The Marine Conservation & Sustainability  
Newsletter by the Maldives Underwater Initiative*

JANUARY 2024



SIX SENSES

LAAMU



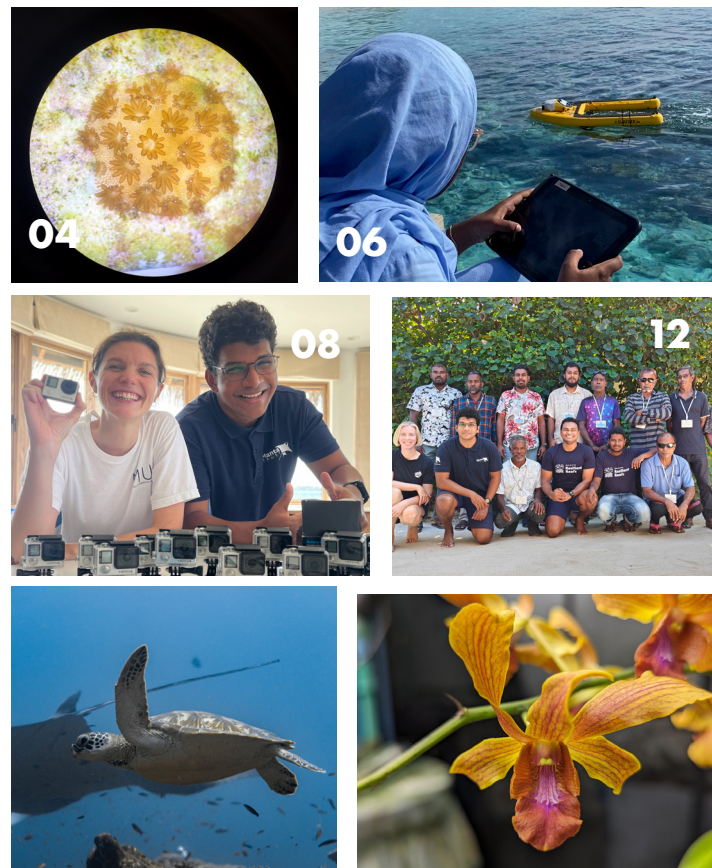
MALDIVES UNDERWATER INITIATIVE by Six Senses Laamu

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## THE BIG STUFF

-  **217** sharks were sighted
-  **80** rays were sighted
-  **146** turtles were sighted
-  **41** Guests joined on megafauna surveys

## OUR EDUCATION

-  **1350** moments of education were shared with guests
-  **257** moments of education were shared with hosts
-  **50** moments of education were shared with the community

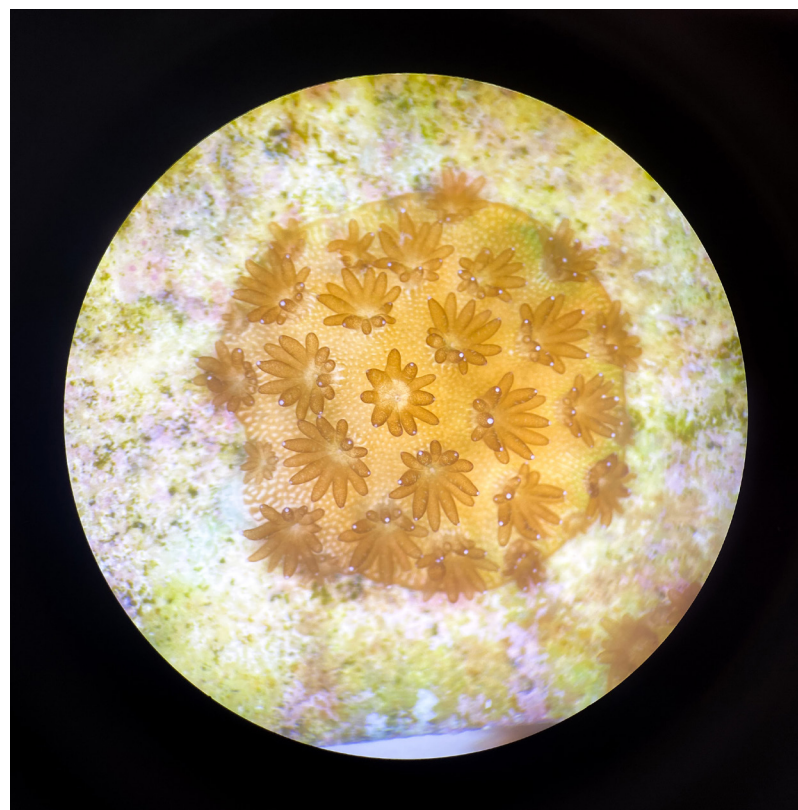


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# SIX SENSES CONSERVATION

## CORAL BABIES BLOOMING



It's been 10 months since the MUI Team initiated the Collaborative for Reefs in Laamu (CRL) Project and the coral babies aren't just getting bigger but we are gaining more and more babies with every spawning!

The first-ever babies are 10 months old and the team has witnessed these beautiful coral babies growing through the process called "Budding". Budding is when the coral polyp clones itself and buds off from their parent polyp so

the colony can grow. Some of the baby coral which started with just 1 polyp have more than 30 polyps now! The team has collected spawns from 5 different moon cycles, with each spawning the number of baby corals increasing. The team has over 20,000 coral babies in the rearing tank as of now! Not all of these corals will survive, some of them will be outgrown by other corals and others will merge themselves. The safe ex-situ environment improves the survival rate of these recruits and

keeps them safe from predators and overgrowing algae. The team will keep these coral babies in their tanks for 2 years, for them to grow a bit older and then these corals will be planted on nearby reefs as a way of restoring the coral reefs in Laamu. As this method of restoration is through the coral's natural reproductive cycle, we are maximizing genetic diversity within the restored population to give these corals a higher chance of survival from a bleaching event in the future.

## PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS FORUM



A representative from Six Senses team, along with others from each of the NGO partners within MUI, were invited to attend the 2024 Protected and Conserved Areas Forum in Male during January. This event was the first of its kind and brought together government officials from the Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy, Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Fisheries and Agriculture, EPA, NGOs, Rangers, and international experts. The presenters

from across all areas contributed knowledge from their field in protected area development, funding and management. As the only resort representative at this event, it was a privilege to hear updates on different ongoing projects within the Maldives. Key takeaways will help to guide how Six Senses can aid the protection of key areas for biodiversity and support government and community efforts.



**33** presentations  
watched on Protected Areas



**8** Breakout and  
Q&A sessions



# FLOATY BOAT IS ON THE MOVE!



The MUI team is thrilled to share the latest updates from our underwater adventures featuring Floaty Boat. In the past, this autonomous surface vessel has been instrumental in releasing our coral larvae in their planula stage onto the reef, but Floaty Boat is playing a major role in assisting us to map our reef as well! Given El Nino's influence in 2023, we anticipate a rise in water temperature in the months ahead. As history has shown, the previous El Nino year took a devastating toll on the Maldives and resulted in a significant 75% coral cover loss nationwide, we expect an even stronger bleaching of many of our vibrant corals within the coming months.

To better understand the effects and recovery of this bleaching event, the team has taken steps to closely study it. Floaty Boat can follow a set track across the reef that can easily be adjusted on an iPad and with an added GoPro attachment, the vessel can also capture images underwater every 0.5 seconds. The team plans to conduct this survey before bleaching, during bleaching, and after bleaching. These captured images will not only serve as visual records but will play a crucial role in constructing 3D maps. This data is invaluable for us to respond to the changes our reef is undergoing and to establish a baseline for coral diversity and distribution before and after the bleaching event.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Queensland University of Technology for their support, in providing the equipment through the Ocean Kind funding facilitated by Matt Dunbain. Additionally, a special acknowledgment goes to Serena Mou for her help throughout this project!

# JUNIOR MARINE BIOLOGY IN 2024

Our Junior Marine Biology program got off to a great start in 2024 with 4 students joining Junior Marine Biology in January 2024. The JMB program continues to develop with each and every student coming through the program. We are constantly developing new and exciting ways for the students to learn about our work here at the Maldives Underwater Initiative by Six Senses Laamu, and how they can protect the oceans back at home too.

We excited to welcome to the team -  
Matteo  
Lucas  
Alexandre  
Otis

 **4** new JMB students



# LIGHTS CAMERA ACTION

This month, the MUI team warmly welcomes Mark Sharman back to the island. Mark is a wildlife cinematographer and recently wrapped up filming for the BBC's Our Changing Planet series in March, and now he's back to collaborate with the MUI team. His presence will greatly enhance our documentation efforts, providing an in-depth look into many of MUI's ongoing projects. With Mark on island for over a month, this gives us a chance to boost our outreach efforts, fostering a deeper understanding of our complex and long-term initiatives within our research, across our education and for the community.



 **1** cinemaphotographer on island



# OUR COMMUNITY

## KUDA FUSHI AGRICULTURAL ISLAND

Lawrence and Adam met with the new owners of a local agricultural island, Kuda Fushi. Due to COVID, the island has been in a low-production state for several years, and with the new ownership, it is looking to revamp its agricultural infrastructure and practices. We were guided through the island, being shown the cucumber growing houses, which are utilizing insect nets to prevent any pests from damaging their crop. This also means that no good insects can pollinate their cucumber flowers, resulting in the need for hand pollination for flower fertilization. Despite the additional effort, the method means no pesticides or additional pest control methods are needed. Watermelon and passionfruit vines are also growing in designed plots. And the island has many coconut, banana, and breadfruit trees, with some papayas also scattered throughout the jungle.

After the agricultural island tour, we brought the Kuda Fushi team to Six Senses Laamu for a resort tour and lunch. We spent lots of time in the organic Leaf Garden and Earth Lab, discussing heat and salt-tolerant seed types, permaculture practices and composting techniques.

We have already received our first crop of cucumbers from Kuda Fushi and are looking forward to the next delivery of fresh, local produce.



 **3** established crops

 **4** local tropical fruits

 **30** kg of cucumbers

# SUPPORTING LOCAL ECOTOURISM AND CULTURE

The Maldives has a rich and vibrant history that spans thousands of years. One monumental event was the change of religion from Buddhism to Islam in the 12th Century. There are many archeological artifacts and the remains of multiple Buddhist structures and buildings. Ancient Buddhist stupas were dismantled and their valuable stones used in other buildings, and in some cases they were covered with earth and soil. These covered stupa, called Havitha in Dhivehi and locally called Haiytheli in Laamu (meaning seven steps - which comes from the seven tiers of the stupas), are an incredible sight, rising from the ground several meters into the air.

In 2023, Six Senses Laamu supported the funding of a Nature Heritage Trail being developed in L. Gan island,

just a 30 minute boat ride away from the resort. The project is led by the Maldives Heritage Society, a Laamu-based NGO dedicated to the conservation, preservation and promotion of the heritage of the Maldives. The nature trail is the first of several phases that will sustainably develop the area with eco-tourism that connects Maldivians and tourists with the history and environment of this wonderful country.

This month, nine lucky hosts from Six Senses Laamu met Thoha, president of Maldives Heritage Society, for a sneak peak at the development of the project. We each planted a tree, the Whistling Pine - a non-native, but culturally significant tree first introduced in the 19th Century. The trail will have several sections of different plants and information boards describing their

importance to visitors. After the tree planting, we walked the trail through to the Haiytheli. Thoha pointed out the depression in the ground, that was the baths of the stupa, before guiding us around the complex of Havitha, which looked just like small hills.

Whether you are tapping into your spiritual side, or noticing the distinct tree species and land formations, there is undeniably a strong presence and significance to the area. We are proud to be supporting locally planned and managed ecotourism development like this and are eagerly awaiting the day when we can bring guests here. At the moment, the guest activity is not ready, but you will be the first to hear about it when it is.

 **9** hosts visited the Haiytheli



 **700** m of nature trail being developed


 **800+** years of buried history



# THE MANTA TRUST



 **17** Remote Underwater Video Systems deployed

 **33** manta ray sightings

 **28** manta rays identified

 **3** acoustic listening devices deployed

## MANTASTIC DONATIONS

This month the Manta Trust team received a generous donation from one of our lovely guests, Allan, who the team was lucky enough to dive with last year! They never got out of touch and since leaving Six Senses Laamu Allan had spent months and months collecting and purchasing a huge amount of equipment for the manta researchers. What makes Allan's contribution particularly noteworthy is his quest for the elusive GoPro Hero 4s – devices that have become as scarce as gold dust in our conservation efforts. GoPro Hero 4s are not produced anymore, and

you might think that there are better quality cameras out there now, but the team prefers them over the newer models for some of their important research projects for a variety of reasons! We can't believe Allan went through so much effort of not only locating and acquiring these & so much more, but also getting them transported all the way from Australia.

**Thank you so much Allan for your continued support and passion for the cause. It means the world to us!**



 **1** new intern

## WELCOME REESHA!

The team is incredibly excited to introduce you to our newest team member - our Laamu Atoll Community Outreach and Research Intern, Reesha. She joined the team at the beginning of the new year and will be assisting our team to understand, communicate and facilitate ways of benefiting the local community of Laamu with what Manta Trust has to offer.

With this MMCP internship, Reesha's aim is to explore and nurture meaningful connections between conservation efforts and the needs of the atoll community. She has previously volunteered in marine conservation activities for close to a decade, with a background in education and multimedia design. With us, she will work alongside schools and local institutions to raise awareness and to identify and develop activities that can help people to foster a healthier relationship with the marine environment.

"There will be ups and downs and it is challenging work but I am hopeful for our ecosystems and our people's livelihood - in these changing times, we can't be losing hope, right? I consider it an awesome incentive that I get to work with the community and learn more about these magnificent ocean giants that our home is blessed with. Mantas have a lot of lessons for us and we have a duty to protect them."

We are really happy to have Reesha aboard our Manta Trust team and are grateful for all the hard work she has already put in.



# ULTRASOUNDING MANTAS

This January, the MUI team had a special filmmaker guest, Mark Sharman, on site. When the Manta Trust team took him on the research boat, the pressure was high, as the ideal footage would have of course been an ultrasound scan of a wild manta on one of Laamu's cleaning stations. But scanning mantas in Laamu usually happens in peak season between May and June, which is also when the team last obtained a useful scan! So the team explained to Mark the chances of filming this would be low at this time of year, but that, as always, the team would take the scanner just in case.



Together they all jumped and descended to the nearest cleaning station. And then, about 5 minutes into the dive, a beautiful large female started entering the cleaning station. She directly approached the team, making circles around them and the cleaning station and hovered calmly above it, waiting for the cleaner wrasses to do their job. This is when Miri, Manta Trust's project manager in Laamu, took her chance and slowly ascended on top of the station, still in sight for the female manta, to then slowly approach the female as calm as possible. And what a success - this female, called Scooter Scooby, stayed so calm for the entire scan which lasted over 2 minutes - it was almost like she

waited for Miri to finish a very thorough scan! The team were so excited - what were the odds of this happening and Mark filming it? Not only was this Mark's first time seeing and filming a wild ultrasound scan on a manta ray - the team did a second dive afterwards and got even more scans from a second female, called Pina Colada.

The team definitely celebrated the day and can't wait to share the videos that Mark took. Maybe the team should have some actual Pina Coladas to cheer the event!

All ultrasound scans are conducted under specific research permits administered by the EPA and MoU by the Hithadhoo Council for conducting research at Kandu Kolhu (Hithadhoo Corner).

# MAKING CONNECTIONS

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This month the Manta Trust was invited by the Fonadhoo Police to a regional community forum. The team is very grateful for Maldives Police Service for giving them the chance to participate in this public perception forum for compiling their Strategic Plan. It was a great opportunity to meet key stakeholders of the Laamu community in one place and hear their concerns and needs discussed. Reesha, our new Community Outreach and Research Intern, represented our team at the forum and learnt a lot about the key issues affecting the community and was excited to communicate with the team the ideas that the

people of the community had shared on ways to improve things across Laamu atoll. Reesha also started making connections with members from the Women Development Committee and teachers from a local pre-school. Since manta themed kids club sessions have been conducted at Six Senses Laamu for many years now, the team wants to explore the possibility of providing kids club sessions for the local community too.

 1 stakeholder Meeting held



# BLUE MARINE FOUNDATION



 **14** fishers sold fish

 **5** guest recreational fishing trips

 **268** fish landed

## FIRST LAAMASEELU MASVERIYAA QUARTERLY MEETING



The Blue Marine and MRR team held the first Laamaseelu Masveriyaa fisher meeting of the year this month. Ten fishers attended including two of the newest fishers recruited in the programme, one of whom supplies Six Senses Laamu with live lobster caught by hand in the northwest part of Laamu atoll. These meetings are an opportunity for the team and fishers to hold collaborative discussions; for the

fishers to share their views, concerns and suggestions and for the team to provide updates to the fishers. At the meeting, an overview of the last five months fishing data was given and action points reviewed. After discussions with resort management and the fishers prior to the meeting, the team shared the decision with the fishers to remove sailfish from the purchasing list as sailfish is now listed as vulnerable on the IUCN

red list and the fishers accepted this decision. The team also shared the exciting news (and photos!) that the LSMV programme has been rolled out to 3 new resorts in 3 other atolls and that this wouldn't have been possible without them as pioneers of supplying fish sustainably to Six Senses Laamu.

 **1** meeting held

# HITHADHOO SCHOOL SEAGRASS WORKSHOP



Ten teenagers from Hithadhoo island generously gave up one morning of their weekend to attend a seagrass workshop run by the Blue Marine and MRR team with help from MUI's new Community Outreach Coordinator.

The team is working closely with Hithadhoo residents to raise awareness of their marine habitats (they are fortunate to have seagrass, coral reefs and mangroves around their island) and build local capacity, in preparation for the official establishment of the first Community Conserved Area (CCA) in the Maldives, which the team is championing and due to come into effect this year.

The teenagers (aged 13-15 years old) were asked what they knew about seagrass, a few knew it was important for fish and turtles but otherwise the knowledge level was low, so the team got to work! The first part of the morning was spent learning the basics in the classroom; what

seagrass is, how it is different to algae and why it is an important ecosystem. Then followed information relevant to the survey - species identification, how to estimate percentage coverage of both seagrass and algae and assessing seagrass health. Armed with this information and all the necessary equipment (quadrat, ruler, data sheet, information guides, mask and snorkel), the children were divided into two groups and guided by the team for the practical survey session in the sea. They worked together to identify species, measure the blade length, estimate percentage coverage in the quadrat and assess health by looking at epiphyte growth. Everyone had an opportunity to do each task and now they have a much higher level of knowledge about their seagrass meadows.

 **1** seagrass citizen science workshop  **10** local kids engaged





# FISHER OF THE MONTH – AHMED MOHAMMED



This past month, the team welcomed a brand-new fisher to the Laamaseelu Masveriyaa Family. Ahmed Mohammed is from the neighboring island of Hithadhoo. Originally a tuna fisher turned reef fisher, Ahmed Mohammed is well-versed in all the tricks of the trade when it comes to fishing. While he excels at catching reef fish, his primary specialty lies in locating and collecting lobsters. He mainly focuses on outside reefs during the 'Iruvai' (NorthEast) monsoon when the seas are calm, and visibility is high.

Ahmed states that he prefers lobster fishing over reef fishing due to their high value, as well as the time he spends snorkeling while searching for the lobsters. Moreover, he mentions that before joining the program, he did not fully grasp the importance of releasing berried lobsters, and he is pleased that he is now engaging in more sustainable practices. Having registered just last month, he has already sold more than 100 lobsters.

# FISH OF THE MONTH - SAILFISH

Known as the torpedoes of the ocean, the Indo-Pacific sailfish can zip through the water at incredible speeds, making them one of the fastest swimmers in the ocean. They are primarily found in warm oceans and are named for their distinctive sail-like dorsal fin and speedy swimming. With their long, slender bodies and vibrant colors, they are a sight to behold. Sailfish are predators that use their bills and impressive speeds to slash through schools of fish, stunning their prey or sometimes impaling them before eating them. Although sailfish are typically solitary hunters, they can coordinate their efforts and uniquely corral schools of fish, taking turns feeding. They are not only fascinating to watch but also play a crucial role in maintaining a healthy balance in the marine ecosystem. Recently designated as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List, they have been removed from the Laamaseelu Masveriyaa purchasing list as a no-take species. This decision was supported by both the fishers and the kitchen and purchasing departments, ensuring the prolonged sustainability of the species.







**OLIVE RIDLEY  
PROJECT**

# THE OLIVE RIDLEY PROJECT



**20** new turtles  
identified



**160** submissions by  
MUI and DBD



**33** in-water  
surveys complete



**1032** turtles in  
Laamu

## TURTLE IN THE SPOTLIGHT - MUI!



### Say Hello to Mui!

Sound familiar? Mui, which translates to “pearl” in local Dhivehi, was named after the MUI team here at Six Senses Laamu! This very newly named juvenile green turtle was first encountered on November 24th last year at Hithadhoo Corner, our local hotspot for resting green turtles. Mui has already been sighted 12 times since then, solidifying their place as a true Laamu resident.

Mui measures about 35 cm in straight carapace length, which is about as small as you’ll find a juvenile green on a reef, so we can assume that they may have just left their open-ocean phase to enter the resident foraging population in Laamu. Green turtles typically attain maturity at around 65 cm in carapace length, and can grow up to 120 cm! It’s no wonder these are the largest of the hard shelled species. Beyond their captivating appearance, these turtles play a crucial role in maintaining the health of seagrass beds. By

grazing on seagrass, they prevent any overgrowth and suffocation of the meadows, while also promoting biodiversity by ensuring no one seagrass species dominates.

“Green” sea turtles got their name from the distinctive green fat found around their bellies; a result of their herbivorous diet. Mui’s appearance also marks a sign of hope for the recovery of the Maldives’ sea turtle population, and underscores the importance of the photo ID research project done by ORP.

## TRAINING SESSIONS WITH NGO PARTNERS ON GAADHOO



**7** new NGO  
members trained



In January, Ibrahim Inaan, the Sea Turtle Ranger and Community Officer for L. Gaadhoo, took 7 members of Gan Youth Society and Maldives Heritage Society on a beach survey on Gaadhoo’s nesting beach as part of the first training sessions with the project’s NGO partners. In addition to learning a great deal about sea turtle nesting and excavations, the members received training from Inaan on gathering nesting data during the survey.

Community partnerships such as these are important to foster a sense of stewardship among community residents while also considering local knowledge and perspectives, which will be vital for the long-term success of the project. Both NGOs have already expressed interest in being more involved and taking part in more surveys with other members of their respective groups.

ORP and EPA initiated partnerships with Gan Youth Society, Maldives Heritage Society, and Fonadhoo Environment and Sustainable Development (FESD) in July last year to enhance community stakeholder involvement and support for the protection of Gaadhoo nesting beach. In the next year, these NGOs will actively participate in conducting surveys, educational sessions, coordinating events, and also providing invaluable advice and local context for the project.



# WHAT DO SEA TURTLES DO WHEN WE'RE NOT LOOKING?



This month, the Olive Ridley Project (ORP) team in Laamu have begun analyzing RUV (Remote Underwater Video) footage of the resident sea turtles on Six Sense Laamu's House Reef. The underwater pinnacles scattered along the House Reef serve as favored resting spots for many of Laamu's green sea turtles. During the daily House Reef snorkel sessions with guests, it's a common occurrence to spot two or three turtles leisurely perched atop these pinnacles. What's more, is that these turtles often include familiar individuals, such as "Smelly," a juvenile green turtle frequently found resting on the same boulder coral during nearly every snorkeling excursion.

The suitability of these pinnacles as resting spots and their proximity to the resort provide a unique opportunity to study the behavior and habitat preferences of resting sea turtles. Using RUV cameras, the team can remotely observe these individuals for extended periods of time without the disturbance of scuba divers or snorkelers, and are able to document the movements, breathing patterns, and any direct interactions between individuals. Of particular interest

to the team are the social interactions between individuals of the same species and those of different species, which are normally rare to witness during dives or snorkels. These observations will contribute to a broader study by ORP to better understand the social behaviors of sea turtles.

While interactions among adult turtles during breeding and around fish-cleaning stations have been extensively documented, detailed accounts of interactions during foraging or resting, which encompass the majority of sea turtles' life history, remain scarce. This is primarily attributed to the challenges of monitoring groups of turtles over prolonged periods in their marine environment. RUV cameras therefore offer a solution to this challenge, providing insight into the underwater lives of sea turtles. Already, the team has captured fascinating interactions between juvenile-female and male-female pairs, challenging the conventional perception that sea turtles are solitary creatures.

 2 interactions recorded



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# OUR HOME

 **47,882** KWH renewable energy

 **5,885** Kg metal recycled with SecureBag

 **371** eggs produced

 **57** guests joined the sustainability tour

 **65** guests experienced our local islands

 **24,855** bottles of water made for guests

## KANUHURA KNOWLEDGE SHARE



Lawrence, Director of Sustainability and Conservation, traveled to Six Senses Kanuhura for a knowledge sharing and strategy development visit. Six Senses Kanuhura was opened under Six Senses management in September 2023, and as a recently opened property, it has multiple unique opportunities for sustainable operations and development.

They boast a large hydroponics facility that can grow 760 plants, more than 5000 orchids growing in the property (including an endemic species bred by orchid researchers) and nesting white-tailed tropic birds. All of the sustainability initiatives are managed by Jacqueline, the Director of Sustainability at Six Senses Kanuhura, whose expertise is in agriculture and ecology. Alternatives to traditional soil-based farming methods are important to develop in the Maldives, where land space is limited and soil conditions can be challenging to grow in. Lawrence has come away feeling like he's just scratched the surface of what hydroponics and aeroponics can offer for the Maldives.

We also tried a few Earth Lab workshops that are new to each other, such as making soap and beeswax wraps. These workshops utilize natural and recycled materials, such as freshly pressed coconut oil and old linen sheets.

 **2** workshops developed

 **1** endemic species of orchid

## WELCOME FITHU TO THE COMMUNITY OF LAAMU



We are excited to introduce you to our new Community engagement coordinator for Six senses Laamu and MUI - Aishath fithura (Fithu)

Fithu grew up in K.Male' but she often got to travel and explore different islands in the South side of the Maldives. Her life has always been intertwined with the ocean and it has been her safe space and her muse growing up.

"One thing my mother still talks about now is how as a child, I was always curious and never scared about the ocean and my keenness to go explore the deep blues"

She previously worked as a multimedia artist before doing her internship with Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme, This is where she fell in love with conservation and research which enabled her to expand on her interest into exploring the ocean. One of things she enjoyed the most during her time with MWSRP was building connections to the surrounding community through education and outreach measures.

Through her internship she came to realize that conservation efforts not only have to come from marine biologists but from everyone, and how conservation work will have minimal impact if the surrounding community doesn't do its part in putting the same amount of effort in conserving the home we all live in. The education, sustainability measures and involvement of the community is a pivotal component to preserve all the effort within conservation.

Fithu is very excited in her new role to work closely with the community of Laamu Atoll and is eager to get stuck into the many projects for the community of Laamu.



**1** new member of the sustainability and conservation team



## WE COULD NOT HAVE DONE IT WITHOUT YOU!

We are tremendously grateful to the multitude of donors who so generously donated funds to the MUI team's research projects; we are indebted to you all.

A special shout-out to our friends who donated \$10,000 USD and more:

Jeffrey  
Andy and Amy  
Erin and Don  
Take Two London  
Sabine and Guy

We look forward to sharing with you the achievements that you made possible.

To learn more about marine conservation and sustainability initiatives at Six Senses Laamu please contact:

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To stay up to date with the latest news, events and visiting experts follow the Maldives Underwater Initiative and Six Senses Laamu on social media.

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