

Returning to Home Shores and Traditions in the Maldives

By Enas Mohamed Riyaz (Tonti), Isha Afeef, and Ibrahim Inaan

There is a long-standing and deeply entwined relationship between the people and sea turtles of the Maldives. The archipelago is home to five species of sea turtles, the most common of which are greens and hawksbills. Their images can be found emblazoned on the Maldives' currency, stamps, and historical artifacts, and turtles are present in cultural songs and folk tales. The historical relationship between Maldivians and turtles is also one of consumption—initially through egg harvest and then through subsistence hunting for meat—and eventually that grew into commercial trade with the advent of tourism in the 1970s.

The hunting of sea turtles and harvest of their eggs continues to this day despite that it is now illegal, and sea turtle habitats are also threatened by ongoing development in a land-scarce country. As pressures on sea turtles in the Maldives increase, a historical model of conservation has also begun to reemerge—one that relies on local-scale stewardship.

The Story of Gaadhoo

The most significant green turtle nesting site in the Maldives is a 500-meter (1,640-foot) strip of beach known as *velaa heylihi* on the island of Gaadhoo. During the 1900s, the beach hosted as

many as 1,400 nests annually, and island community members acted as custodians of the beach. Using indigenous knowledge of sea turtle reproduction and habitats, the island office systematically managed the turtle nesting beach by selectively harvesting eggs to generate revenue for community development. Everyone in the community participated in, and benefited from, that unique system of managing and sustainably harvesting sea turtle eggs, and community members actively defended nesting turtles from hunters. Unfortunately, that symbiotic system was not to last.

The ban on sea turtle egg harvesting imposed by the central government in 2006 unintentionally disempowered the community, which, without access to the eggs, could no longer manage the beach using its traditional methods. Yet without a tangible system in place for the government to enforce the ban, the illegal take of nesting turtles and eggs increased uncontrollably. Sadly, by the time the residents of the island were relocated to a nearby island in 2016, nesting had reportedly declined by 40 percent or more. Gaadhoo remains the only known island in the Maldives to have protected a nesting beach long before state-implemented conservation policies required it.

National Protection of Sea Turtles in Maldives

Despite the 2016 designation of sea turtles as protected species in Maldives, changing people's attitudes and behaviors around conservation remains a challenge. Because of the geographically dispersed nature of this island nation, implementing legislation at the local level has proven to be difficult and is hindered by a top-down approach that fails to incorporate community-based conservation models. Additionally, the sea turtle conservation work being done at the community level by councils or locally based NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) is often underrepresented because of financial restrictions or lack of access.



An aerial view of Gaadhoo and its seagrass meadows. © Leanna Crowley

Apart from the government-backed law enforcement and protection of sea turtle habitats, the types of sea turtle conservation projects in the Maldives that receive the majority of recognition are those based in the country's numerous tourist resorts. Isolated from local communities, these efforts largely engage with tourists through activities focused on seeing sea turtle hatching events or on up-close rescue and rehabilitation of adult turtles. That isolation has created a negative bias against sea turtle conservation among local communities, because those efforts are widely viewed as a profitable colonialist venture catering to Western conservation principles and benefiting only the tourism industry.

Returning to Traditional Conservation Practices

The importance of community-based conservation models is now recognized at the policy level by the Maldives Ministry of Environment. Hence, the Environmental Protection Agency of Maldives and the Olive Ridley Project have been collaborating

to launch a community-based sea turtle conservation project in Laamu Atoll, where Gaadhoo is. Since January 2022, the team has been working with the local government, atoll-based NGOs, and other key stakeholders, including a local sea turtle "ranger" hired from the atoll, to monitor Gaadhoo's nesting beach. The community—including former residents of Gaadhoo—has shown incredible willingness to take ownership of the project. Efforts are currently under way with atoll-based NGOs to provide capacity-building and financial opportunities for the work. The preliminary findings are hopeful, with a clear indication that poaching activities have decreased, likely because of the consistent monitoring of the nesting beach by the ranger, who works alongside agricultural workers who also reside on the atoll.

Indigenous methods are also being incorporated into the management plan for the nesting beach, which was designated as a National Protected Area in 2021. There are plans to replicate this model of empowering local communities in conservation science and management in other nesting beaches in the country. After many years lost at sea, we are finally remigrating back to local shores and traditional techniques for conservation stewardship. ●



A former resident of Gaadhoo, Maldives, in the Gaadhoo mangroves. A return to traditional conservation approaches is helping study and protect Gaadhoo's turtle population. © Andy Ball