The day starts off as any typical ‘manta research’ day - Food is collected (brownies; check!), the cooler box is filled with as many cool drinks as we can carry. Towels are piled high, free-diving gear is gathered, cameras are tested and secured, and the trolley is wheeled out onto the jetty towards what has become our offshore home - the Manta Dhoni. As we motion the trolley towards the boat the crystal clear waters on either side of the jetty spark a sense of anticipation for what lies ahead. Marked by a mesmerising sense of colour, feeding fish excitedly dart from coral frame to coral frame and instil a sense of eagerness and enthusiasm in us all- the energy explosion we witness here is only a fraction of what we expect to encounter for the remainder of the day.

The boat is ready to go and we set off for a day of manta excitement. Sun-screen is applied by us fair-skinned individuals (bleh!) and we all take up our unspoken, ritualistic positions on the boat- mine being the top of the stairs on the left hand side of the boat. From the rooftop, I watch as the hull breaks the glassy blue waters and the frothy wake spurts up refreshing drops of water. This is our quiet time, this is the time we all choose to remain calm, and on the days when excitement levels exceed what is humanly possible, this is the only time we have to prepare ourselves for the adrenaline that overwhelms the next 6+ hours of the day.

Today is a slightly different day for me though. It is the last day I will be on the research boat, the last day I will dip into the warm, welcoming Maldivian waters, the last day I will spend interacting with mantas and spending time with my new found family- the Manta Team, and, not to mention, the last day I will be ‘stung’ by plankton. Gazing off into the distance I reflect on my time here. It has been almost two months since I arrived in paradise and since I encountered my first manta ray and whale shark - a memory I will treasure forever. I have learnt so much about these incredible creatures and have had such a privileged experience swimming with them. No words, pictures or videos could ever have prepared me for this “once-in-a-life-time” opportunity. In fact I am still waiting to wake up from the dream.
For my summer placement I chose to focus my research on the historical status of some of the charismatic species that frequent the Maldives seas, with particular focus on manta rays. I was afforded the privileged opportunity of working with the Manta Trust Team in the Maldives to fulfil the priorities of my research. Since 2005 the Manta Trust Team has been recording information on manta rays that frequent the Maldives. They have built up a sound database of manta behaviour, population dynamics, and movements throughout the region but are unable to fully understand and interpret this information without considering how these movements may differ over a longer time frame. As such, it has been suggested that it would be a valuable undertaking to attempt to capture the historical knowledge of local fishermen given that very little direct data exists pre-2005.

Through a series of interviews with local fishers my project aimed to evaluate how manta ray abundances may have changed over time by drawing comparisons between the traditional knowledge and current day observations. The study aimed to identify current threats to manta populations in the Maldives and possibly provide insight into ways management can improve the conservation of this charismatic species. The interviews were also designed to evaluate the local community’s perception of conservation projects and to assess the degree to which more community involvement may address current disparities in conservation efforts.

My research has afforded me the ideal opportunity to visit the vast majority of the locally inhabited islands of Baa Atoll and interact with some of the wonderfully interesting people characteristic of these islands. As an English speaking foreigner I anticipated that many of the interviews and interactions with the island folk may have proved challenging. But instead I was humbled by the welcoming nature of the majority
of local fishermen who often invited me into their homes, eager to reflect on their fishing experience and communicate their incredible stories; often explained by means of well animated antics. I was fortunate enough to learn a great deal through these interviews, not only in terms of the research work, but also a deeper understanding and insight into the history, lifestyle, culture and traditions of the Maldivians- something I found extremely rewarding.

As we return home from an exhilarating day swimming with mantas, the sun begins to set and a shimmering pattern of light reflects off the still waters. I turn around one last time and scan the beauty I have been fortunate enough to experience. Islands dot the expansive colours of blue, coral blocks fade into the distance and the subtlety of the rippling waves gently rocks the boat. The smooth swaying creates a peaceful atmosphere and restores a sense of “calm” in us all. No words can express my appreciation for this incredible opportunity. In the past two months I have lived in one of the finest, naturally beautiful places on earth; swum with possibly some of the most amazing creatures to mark this planet; visited the quaintest, fascinating and seemingly beautiful locally inhabited islands; and conversed with many of the oldest, and wisest members of the society. I have learnt a great deal about the Maldivian lifestyle and am truly humbled by their sense of unity and support within a community. The past 8 weeks has also afforded me the amazing opportunity of working with the Manta Trust Team who are truly some of the most incredible people I have ever had the privilege of meeting. The friends I have made here are life-long friends. The laughs, crazy times, exciting manta expeditions and whale shark euphoria will be the memories we share forever and I will miss being a member of the team. It’s time for me to close this chapter but an inter-leading door will always remain wide-open. "Libunu ufaaveri handhaan thakah shukuriyya, alun dhimaavaane dhuvahakah inthizaarukuran"- Thank you for the memories, until we meet again!