I was lucky enough to spend my summer placement with the Maldivian Manta Ray Project (MMRP), based at the Four Seasons Resort in Landaa Giraavaru, Baa Atoll. It seemed the perfect way to end an already incredible year. I arrived in the Maldives in early July with the manta season already underway. My first tasks were to get to know these magnificent creatures better and decide on the focus for my research project.

Five of the 32 marine protected areas (MPAs) in the Maldives exist because of the seasonal presence of manta rays. This includes Hanifaru Bay in Baa Atoll, which has become one of the best known places in the world for manta encounters. Given this, a management plan has been created for Hanifaru Bay, to protect manta rays and whale sharks from the tourists who come to see them. Such protection does not currently extend to human-manta interactions elsewhere in Baa Atoll, a recently declared UNESCO Biosphere Reserve for its globally significant biodiversity. The Maldivian Government recognises that the continuing growth of tourist activities within the Hanifaru Bay MPA threatens the sustainability of this unique site and therefore requires very careful management, including the need for Codes of Practice on how people should behave towards animals.

Previous observations of tourism impacts on mantas in the Maldives by the MMRP and former York MSc students have highlighted issues of concern when large numbers of people encounter mantas. Given the increasing popularity of people’s desire to encounter mantas the need to address this problem has also risen. For example at the end of 2009, 97 island resorts and 145 live-aboard vessels in the Maldives, offered tourists the chance to encounter mantas. By 2010 tourist numbers had increased by 158% and boats by 82% compared to the 2009 levels. To investigate the impacts of tourism on manta behaviour at Baa Atoll I assed:

- Interaction types and human behaviours when snorkelers and divers encounter mantas.
- Manta behaviours in response to encounters with people, including avoidance and flight responses.
- Overall levels of disturbance to mantas during encounters with people.

I set about compiling the first formal description of manta behaviour in a tourism context by collecting and analysing data of snorkelers and divers in their interactions with manta rays at six manta feeding aggregation sites. I also assessed diver interactions with manta rays at six “cleaning stations” – i.e places where mantas go to be “cleaned” by cleaner wrasse fish. Days were spent in and out of the water observing and videoing human-manta interactions. Some days involved long waits and a bit of time to reflect on the incredible and privileged experience I was having. We even got to spend time in the water with a few friendly whale sharks!

My results showed that the majority of tourists in Baa Atoll behaved in a responsible manner such that most of their interactions did not appear to disturb the mantas. Most tourists were happy to observe mantas from an appropriate distance, although there were a few instances of people who
chased, obstructed or dived too near the mantas. The findings of my work have since been used to provide the first evidence-based recommendations for a “Code of Conduct” created for manta tourism.

My summer placement in the Maldives was a fantastic opportunity to conduct my own piece of research into an area I was passionate about. It also allowed me to participate in workshops and to provide presentations and briefings to tourists on manta excursions. During my time at Baa atoll several film crews and journalists joined our research boat which gave me a great insight into wildlife documentary filmmaking – I even made it onto the small screen (check out: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/fast_track/9700541.stm)! The long days on the boat and many evenings of data entry and analysis were worth every minute of my effort for the experience I received in Baa atoll. My amazing photos and memories are all there to prove it!