Plenty more fish in the sea? - Biomass and biodiversity of coral reef mesopredators on Laamu Atoll, Maldives

Without a doubt, the highlight of my year has been the two months I spent in the Maldives for my summer placement. I was lucky enough to be offered a placement with the Manta Trust’s Laamu Atoll project. The project is based at the beautiful Six Senses Laamu, a luxury resort in the south of the country. Working in an office on stilts above a stunning coral reef in the Indian Ocean has to be the best work environment I’ve ever found myself in. Having the opportunity to dive almost every day on vibrant reefs or with majestic manta rays was incredible.

The aim of my project was to quantify the biodiversity and biomass of coral reef mesopredators around the atoll. This consisted of carrying out surveys at 12 sites so that I could get a good picture of the different types of reefs and what the populations of groupers, snappers and sweetlips are like at different depths at each of these locations. In addition to conducting transects on the reef, I also interviewed fishermen from two islands about their catches, techniques, any changes they have noticed, and their views on fisheries management. It was great to be able to study these different perspectives so that I could get a better understanding of the fish stocks and the pressures they are under. The atoll will be facing some significant changes in the future so this study provides valuable insight and can be used as a baseline to compare to future surveys.

Of course the most important part of my placement was the project itself, but I was also able to get involved with a range of extra-curricular activities. For example, I went on manta survey dives, attended meetings with fishermen, tried my hand at reef fishing and helped with the party celebrating the 100th manta identified by the Laamu manta project. Carrying out an independent research project in a completely new environment was quite a challenge, but has been an amazing experience!