

## **Blog**

I was lucky enough to spend my summer placement dissertation with the Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme on the Island of Dhigurah, in South Ari Atoll, Maldives. My project compared data from whale shark encounters within South Ari, where sightings have remained constant in recent years, with those in Baa Atoll, where numbers have drastically fallen. My aims were to first track where the whale sharks were going when they left Baa and determine what environmental variables were driving the whale sharks out of Baa in the first place.



Alongside this, I assisted the MWSRP in their data collection. This meant getting in the water with these amazing animals primarily to take photo identification shots. Nothing can describe that unbelievable and awe inspiring feeling you get when you see a

whale shark underwater for the first time. It's hard to truly appreciate the sheer size of these gentle giants until you find yourself swimming next to one!

As well as collecting data on whale sharks I also had the opportunity to see and collect data on a wide variety of other mega-fauna, including turtles, dolphins, many other species of sharks, and on one occasion false killer whales!

One of the best aspects about my summer placement was the many opportunities to get involved in community projects. During my stay I co-wrote a play about whale sharks, coral reefs and the effects of climate change, which I

performed in front of a local school. I also assisted in giving educational lessons to two local schools on the ecology and biology of whale sharks, and the basic research aims of the MWSRP. I also helped design a storybook on whale sharks and climate change, which was presented to local school children in Male for a special IUCN Maldives event on Climate Change. I was also involved with two community beach cleans (surprisingly more fun than it sounds!).

One of the best parts about being based on a local island, was that I got to experience and appreciate authentic Maldivian culture. The people were also very warm and welcoming. There were opportunities to play sports with the local children in the afternoon including football, badminton, cricket and volleyball. As well as this there is a water sports centre on the island where you can



wakeboard, water ski or rent canoes for the day to explore the island. There are also two dive centres for those enjoy SCUBA diving or are interested in learning.

Ultimately my time with the MWSRP was one of the most memorable experiences of my life, and I am very privileged and grateful to have been given the opportunity to do my summer placement there.

