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Voices of Island Guardians: A story of Shark-Human Coexistence & The Rising Shark Tourism Industry in Fuvahmulah, Maldives

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Voices of Island Guardians:

A story of shark-human coexistence & the rising shark tourism industry in Fuvahmulah, Maldives

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Executive Summary

On the island of Fuvahmulah, Maldives, community members have learned to co-exist with resident tiger sharks. Rapidly becoming a premier destination for shark tourism, Fuvahmulah demonstrates a novel circumstance for how this often-polarizing industry can both bolster the local economy *and* strengthen shark conservation efforts. Focusing on personal storytelling, this project delivers a 5-part video series and interactive website featuring video portraits of locals involved in and impacted by the industry. This anecdotal multimedia approach helps examine the grey areas of shark tourism while addressing ways to ensure its sustainability and longevity on the island.

Introduction

Wildlife encounters have been a rising trend in the global tourism industry, as more people seek out opportunities to observe megafauna in their natural habitats. These experiences can be beneficial to conservation efforts, as they often result in a positive change in human attitude and perception, increasing environmental awareness and driving a more pro-conservation mindset in those individuals.¹ This attitude shift is especially valuable for misunderstood predatory species that have typically been feared or portrayed negatively—like sharks.¹ Among popular wildlife encounters, shark tourism is on the rise, attracting high volumes of tourists across 45 countries globally.²

Fuvahmulah, Maldives: A Case Study

Highly driven by consumer demand in diving experiences with marine megafauna, tourism dominates the economy in the Maldives, accounting for almost a third of gross domestic product.² Sharks have been protected in the waters off of Maldives since 2010, when the government implemented a shark sanctuary and total ban on shark fishing.² Specifically, the island of Fuvahmulah has been gaining popularity in recent years as a diving destination due to its high abundance and diversity of sharks and other pelagic life, earning the nickname Shark Island.

Among the nearly dozen species of sharks regularly spotted throughout the dive sites, the island is most well-known for its resident tiger sharks. These sharks gather in the shallow waters of the local fishermen's boat harbor, having become accustomed to the fishermen throwing overboard the fish scraps from their daily catch. The dive shops now facilitate 'tiger shark dives,' based on self-regulated rules, organizing a schedule and overall process for diving the harbor. Part of this process involves purchasing tuna fish scraps from local fishermen, which dive guides then bury under rock mounds at the harbor dive site. This provides a form of provisioning—or luring—to keep the sharks' focus there, while avoiding direct hand feeding.³ In this way, the local dive operators have managed to safely capitalize on the presence of these tiger sharks, while creating a ripple effect of benefits for the community economy.

However, some scientists and environmentalists remain concerned about the ecological and safety implications of any form of feeding, chumming or establishing associations between humans and food.⁴ They are skeptical about the risk such forms of shark tourism could pose on participants as well as the impact it can have on sharks' behaviors.⁴ Management controls to mitigate risk have been implemented in other shark tourism destinations, such as Hawaii and Florida, where shark feeding has been banned.^{3,4} However, the conversation remains split between those that believe in the value of shark tourism and those that consider it too unethical or risky.

Among these polarizing debates, Fuvahmulah offers a novel case study, considering the island's geographical and socio-ecological context. Unlike shark diving operations in other locales that chum waters in the open ocean to attract sharks, the tiger sharks in Fuvahmulah were already present in the harbor. Local dive shops simply discovered a prime dive site. Now the island community is thriving, hospitality businesses are on the rise, and fishermen are now gaining a supplemental salary from being part of the shark diving value chain.

Even the local fishermen's perception of sharks is positive compared to fishermen in other parts of the Maldives. Outside of Fuvahmulah, many reef fishermen claim that the abundance of sharks directly competes with their livelihood.⁵ 73% of reef fishermen have reported an increase in shark depredation on their catch after the implementation of the shark sanctuary.⁶ As fellow predators of reef fish, sharks target the fishermen's catch, and these interactions can lead to the fishermen killing the sharks in defense.⁵ There are also intentional instances of shark culling by fishermen who try to make a statement against the ban to add pressure on the government.⁷ However, in Fuvahmulah, the fishermen have a stake in the shark diving business. The community has come together to develop a set of 'customary laws' that prioritize safety and benefit them collectively. Therefore, their approach represents the importance of place-based solutions and community collaboration—contributing to both shark conservation and economic development.

This project fills the gap in this binary dialogue by illuminating the complexities of shark tourism and its role within an island community—hearing directly from the voices of Fuvahmulah locals who live and breathe these changes.

Project Goal

My goal is to address the 'grey area' challenges of shark tourism by sharing personal stories of local community members who are involved in and have been impacted by the industry. By combining research with anecdotal and observational data, this project offers a more nuanced approach to addressing the often-polarizing topic, addressing the research questions: How has the rise of the shark tourism industry impacted the

local island community? What can those involved in the industry do to ensure the longevity and sustainability of the industry in the Maldives? The featured stories build upon ongoing conservation efforts, focusing on the benefits of shark tourism within this socioeconomic context. And the information is made accessible as an educational tool for visitors as well as a resource that can help influence local government and decision makers in how they protect their island communities and shark populations.

Specific Objectives

To fulfill the goals of this project, I plan on achieving the following objectives:

- **Capture personal stories** of island locals involved in and impacted by the shark tourism industry, such as a dive shop owner, dive guide and fisherman
- **Create a platform** to raise community voices and offer anecdotal data from different perspectives and stakeholder interests
- **Highlight ecological and ethical concerns** of 'shark diving' and the importance of determining regionally and socially relevant tourism practices
- **Demonstrate the role** customary laws play in regulating shark dives in lieu of official government regulations
- **Illustrate the benefit** of a collaborative approach to shark conservation by showing how dive operators and the fishing community can work together
- **Develop a blueprint** of considerations for tourists or divers visiting the Maldives to help individuals make better informed decisions on how to engage with local businesses and natural resources
- **Take a case study approach** to emphasize the need for place-based solutions in wildlife tourism and conservation efforts

Methodology

- Plan trip to Fuvahmulah, Maldives, engage known contacts, share project goals
- Engage scientific diver (Kenan Chan) and SIO Diving Safety Officer (Christian McDonald) to gain approval for dives and underwater video capture
- Prepare for onsite production, developing video treatment, shot list and draft interview questions for each featured individual
- Travel to Fuvahmulah, Maldives: scout shoot locations, identify and engage interview subjects, finalize interview questions, conduct interviews, capture b-roll and footage of subjects
- Process interview and b-roll footage, edit videos using Adobe Premiere Pro, edit photos using Adobe Lightroom, publish videos on Youtube as series/playlist
- Design and develop webpage on Squarespace (hosted by [Miyaru.org](https://miyaru.org))

Deliverable

Over the 10-week quarter, I filmed, edited and created a 5-part video series and an interactive webpage. Each video is treated as a 'video portraiture' that features the stories of the locals I interviewed. And the webpage, hosted by Miyaru, creates a platform that provides additional context for the videos, making the stories accessible to both visitors and local stakeholders in Fuvahmulah. The webpage format creates an opportunity to expand this project in phases to add other voices in the future.

[Link to video playlist](#)

[Link to website: https://miyaru.org/stories](https://miyaru.org/stories)

Findings & Key Takeaways

The video portraitures offer a variety of nuanced perspectives on the impact of shark tourism on the island community, including stories from:

- **Hamna**, the island's first female dive instructor and shark guide, who reflects on her personal journey into diving and the changing dynamics within the industry.
- **Thoal**, a dive center owner and recreational fisherman, who discusses the realities and challenges of running the tiger shark dives and rapid changes he's witnessed in both the community and the sharks' behaviors.
- **Shehenaz**, a member of the City Council and founder of Women in Fuvahmulah, who explains how the dive industry has created many ocean-related career opportunities for the community, encouraging more youth and women to get involved as well.
- **Aslam**, a fisherman turned dive center employee, who explains the evolving relationship between the diving industry and fishing community and reveals the origins of why the sharks started aggregating in the boat harbor.
- **Abdul**, a seasoned fisherman, who shares his concerns about the shark species surrounding the island, explaining the different behaviors he's seen between the tiger sharks and silver tips that are also commonly sighted swimming in schools.

Through these conversations, I learned that the community tends to have a positive sentiment about the rising shark tourism industry and the benefits they share collectively as a result. However, they acknowledge that there is still much to be done in terms of finding ways to collaborate more and creating regulations that consider all the stakeholders involved; and there are still many unknowns to how this level of activity will continue to impact the community, the sharks and the ocean ecosystem. The community's stories reinforce the importance of looking at shark diving at the regional level and not as a black and white topic with rules that could apply globally. What is happening in Fuvahmulah—the way they organize the shark dives, their method of feeding, the community agreements and regulations—cannot be directly applied to another shark destination, and vice versa.

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