

BAA ATOLL CONSERVATION FUND BOARD MEETING

Date: 03 September 2025

Time: 1:00pm to 2:35pm

Venue: Teams Meeting / ONLINE

Minutes of the Meeting

The Board meeting of the Baa Atoll was attended by 11 participants from 8 stakeholder organisations (Annex 1).

The meeting was chaired by the Director General of Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve Office, Mr. Ibrahim Naeem.

In his opening remarks he welcomed all members who were present in the meeting and briefed the participants on the agenda (Annex 2) scheduled for the meeting.

The Chair also cited that a meeting of the Board is being held after sometime and apologised for the delay in holding the meetings due to various reasons and assured the members that in future, meetings will be held more frequently.

Agenda Item 1, Presentation by Fund Manager, Baa Atoll Conservation Fund

As the first item on the Agenda for the day, BACF Fund Manager presented the Income and Expenditure Reports from 2020 to 2024 and opened the floor for questions.

Discussion points raised by: National Boating Association of Maldives (NBAM)

- The Representative highlighted the need for all presented information to be made available to the public for all to access.
- He also stated that meetings should be held more frequently and on a regular basis.

In reply to this the Fund Manager stated that the new BACF website is presently under construction as the old BACF website had all this information earlier but is down due to technical issues from the service provider and although work was carried out to rectify these problems these issues were not solved, hence BACF was advised to develop a new website and once completed all information will be available through the website.

Agenda Item 2, Presentation by Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve Office Fund

The presentation by Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve Office covered the 3 main areas of work of the BR Office.

Conservation Programme

The first point highlighted by BR Office was that as the number of resorts and guest houses are increasing in the atoll there is a significant increase in the usage of protected areas and the associated increase of vessels and people inside protected areas.

The Representative from BR Office presented visitor statistics of Hanifaru MPA and Mendhoo Region for the past 4 years together with details of Tour Guide Certification/Exams conducted. He mentioned that there is a marked increase in local visitors to both Hanifaru and Mendhoo Region.

With regards to management plans for other protected areas in the atoll it was mentioned that access to all protected areas is permitted after approval from BR Office and the management plan for Angafaru Area is at the final draft stage and for other PA's at different stages of finalization.

It was further stated that at future management plans each area will have its own type of management and there will be areas managed by BR Office, co-managed areas and areas managed by local Councils depending on the significance of the area as the case is now.

It was also informed that 4 new areas have been declared protected within the atoll bringing the total to 13.

The representative also informed that as a pilot programme, Mendhoo Region is being monitored remotely using remote cameras and a radar system with the support of UK OCCP assistance and the results of these have been very positive since its installation over 6 months ago.

It has been observed that since the installation of the remote system of monitoring illegal access to the island has been minimised and poaching of turtle nests has decreased as more undisturbed turtle nests have been detected on the island.

BR Office further informed that the System installed on Mendhoo is an ideal way forward for monitoring and management and lessons learned from this pilot project can be used in other areas of the atoll and across the country as well.

Outreach Programme

With regards to the Outreach Programme it was stated that all schools in Baa Atoll have been visited by the BR Team from 2022 to 2024 and over 500 to 700 students have been engaged over the last 3 years and out of these 200 students have had the experience in the field visiting protected areas and gaining first-hand knowledge of work undertaken by BR Office.

Working together with Baa Atoll Council and Four Season Landaa Giraavaru, Marine Internship programme Levels 1 and 2 have been completed by students of Baa Atoll during the past 3 years and Level 3 at present is ongoing. The main objective of the Internship Programme is to create interest among the youth on marine biodiversity and to develop future marine biologists from the atoll.

Apart from students from Baa Atoll students from Maldives National University and students from Mumbai School visited also Baa Atoll BR during the past year where they were provided information on Baa Atoll BR and were provided the opportunity to visit the have field experience.

To add to this students from 3 schools from Male' and students from Fuvahmulah School comprising of 47 students and 3 teachers visited Baa Atoll BR as well and were briefed on the work of the Office and were taken to the field.

During the last 3 year Baa Atoll BR Office working together with Four Season Landaa Giraavaru continued the Moodhu Madharasaa Programme on Dhonfan and Dharavandhoo which consists of 6 modules on education and awareness on Environment. The participants of this programme also gained first-hand knowledge of work undertaken by BR Office and in the field as well.

Livelihoods Programme

The 2 room apartments built under co-funding from BACF and Baa Atoll Council in 2020 has been completed on all 13 inhabited islands of the atoll and these apartments are directly benefiting the communities. Some apartments have been rented out for long term while others are used as daily rooms for rent and in some cases used as accommodation for school teachers and in other cases housing of temporary Police facility on the island as well.

Research Activities

As research is an integral part of any Biosphere Reserve all research activities within Baa Atoll BR are conducted upon approval from Environmental Protection Agency.

The research at present are conducted by Manta Trust, Olive Ridley Project and the Maldives Whaleshark Research Programme and are carried out working together with BR Office.

Discussion points raised by:

National Boating Association of Maldives (NBAM)

- The Representative highlighted that in Hanifaru Bay there are drifting incidences especially late in the afternoon when there are strong north western currents and the need to find a mechanism to install a small buoy or a rope for drifting tourists to use or have a platform or place a dinghy on the other side of reef used by the safari vessels to avoid any negative publicity of the area in case if an incident occurs.
- He also added that maintenance of moorings at Hanifaru bay needs to be undertaken regularly.
- Research is important but the findings are not available for the dive industry and locals and the need for these to be published on the website.

In reply to this the BR Representative stated there has been drifting incidences recorded in the past and the Ranger vessel have attended these if and when required. He suggested that allowing individual vessels to move across bay is not advisable and the Ranger vessel will be used if an incident occurs.

On the issue of Hanifaru mooring buoys representative from BR Office added that prior to the start of manta season all mooring buoys were in place but moorings need to be repaired from time to time due to strong currents and weather as they get damaged.

He also informed that a permanent solution to this will be found once the required equipment to undertake this work is available once it is procured which is an ongoing at present.

The point on installing a mooring buoy or a platform across the bay is well noted but a decision will be taken once the ongoing research is completed and if favourable to undertake and once the required change is made to the management plan.

On the point on awareness and outreach the representative agreed that more effort needs to be undertaken to convey the message across as there have been instances when wrong information is spread across the community knowingly or unknowingly.

He further pointed that all research is approved by EPA and all findings will be published once the website is live.

Agenda Item 3, Presentation of Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve Office Workplan 2025 and Budget

Baa Atoll BR Office Workplan 2025 consists of the 3 programmes (Conservation Programme, Outreach Programme and Livelihoods Programme) conducted by Baa Atoll BR Office. In presenting the Workplan it was highlighted the Workplan is mostly a continuation and repetition of work from the 3 programmes of BR Office from previous years together with additional new activities. In this regard the activities proposed to be undertaken under the Workplan 2025 is and the budget was presented.

It was also stated that apart from the regular activities proposed in the Workplan, repair and maintenance of an additional vessel for Baa Atoll BR and construction first phase of BR Office building on Eydhafushi is included in the Workplan as well.

Discussion points raised by: Ministry of Tourism and Environment

- The representative stated that Workplan should focus on increasing visibility of BACF and Baa Atoll BR and should include activities in restoring and adding billboards on inhabited and all protected areas and adding nameboards at all 2-bedroom apartments built on the 13 inhabited islands.
- She also stated that the Workplan should invest in communication and outreach as this an area which needs to be addressed and if possible, cater for community level engagement activities on special occasions like celebrating Eid and sporting events to improve visibility and ownership of BACF and Baa Atoll BR by the communities.

The Chair highlighted these are important points and these need to be further explored.

The representative from BACF clarified that points highlighted by the representative from the Ministry are reflected in the Workplan and agreed that to improve visibility more visible work needs to be undertaken working with all stakeholders involved.

National Boating Association of Maldives (NBAM)

- The work undertaken by the Rangers are very good and efficient and the Rangers themselves are in contact with safari vessels when manta rays and whale sharks are sighted in the bay.
- The Representative then clarified whether there could there be a mechanism established to inform the safari vessels sightings of manta rays and whale sharks for the past 3 days or so, enabling them to prepare the excursion trips accordingly.
- It was also proposed by NBAM to allow access to Hanifaru bay only for those who have operating licenses.

The representative from Baa Atoll BR Office stated at present there exists a WhatsApp group for resorts and dive schools updating information daily on sightings and could use the same medium of communication for safari vessels as well and for this to materialize will require assistance from NBAM.

He further mentioned that by creating a WhatsApp group, safari vessels operators will have the same information as the resorts and dive schools and will require NBAM's assistance on this issue and will communicate with NBAM on this subject.

He also thanked NBAM for the kind word expressed in appreciation of the work undertaken by BR Office and it's staff.

It was also mentioned that access is presently allowed for those parties who have operational licenses.

Agenda Item 4, Presentation of Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve Fee Structure

A presentation was given on the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve fee structure outlining the present structure by the Fund Manager of BACF. In his presentation he highlighted the following:

- The current fee structure was formulated 13 years ago after consultations with the then existing 6 resorts and 6 dive schools together with the other stakeholders.
- The number of resorts in Baa Atoll have increased to 18 plus within the last 13 years whereby increasing the amount of dive schools and guest house tourism is on the rise in the atoll.
- The present fee structure mentions voluntary payment of partnership fees by resorts on an annual basis.
- Work has been undertaken to increase the number of resort partners bur resorts opt for the dive school partnership model.
- According to the latest information 11 Dive Schools pay the annual partnership fee and guests travelling to resorts are satisfied since their guests can experience hanifaru MPA via the dive school arrangement.

- In order to undertake work with direct financial benefits to the community's revenue needs to be increased to the fund.
- The current fee structure needs to be revised as it was endorsed long time ago as inflation, cost of fuel and other materials have increased during the past years.

Based on the above the Fund Manager opened the floor for discussions on whether we need to decrease the annual resort partnership payment amount or abolish the resort partnership agreements, abolish dive school agreements or increase the face value of access permits for protected areas.

He also further mentioned that the proposed changes will be discussed with all stakeholders and it is hoped that a proposal can be submitted to the next board meeting of BACF.

The Chair agreed that fee structure was established a while ago and there is a need for revision based on the presentation but these changes should be brought after consultation with all involved.

**Discussion points raised by:
National Boating Association of Maldives (NBAM)**

- Abolish partnerships with Dive Schools and Liveaboards for now and gradually increase the face value of access permits giving advance notice that fees will be increased.
- When increasing the fees we should bear in mind that a huge increase might send wrong messages to the tourism industry and a gradual increase is required.
- All parties using Hanifaru MPA area should pay a flat rate which will be good in terms of revenue generated
- The existing Resort partnership agreements could be in place but a 50% discount on access permits should not be the case.
- To prepare a discussion paper on this subject and share with all stakeholders.

Representatives from BACF and BR Office clarified on the proposed views provided by NBAM and suggested as discussed to develop a draft proposal to be discussed with all stakeholders to be presented to the next Board meeting.

Other matters:

The Fund Manager informed that the Auditor General's Office is at present conducting a Protected Area Performance Audit of protected areas in Baa Atoll and have presented their initial findings to the Ministry which has been shared back with them with the necessary comments.

He also mentioned that the work being carried out by the Audit Office is a new form of audit being conducted in Maldives and the recommendations of the Performance Audit will highlight issues, challenges and recommend improvements for performance.

The following was approved by the BACF Board in its meeting held on 3 September 2025:

- a. The next meeting of the Board to be held in October.

- b. Minutes of the Board meeting together with supporting documents to be circulated for comments and approval and if no comments are received to be considered final.
- c. Put on hold partnership fees of Dive Schools and Safari Vessels.
- d. BACF to develop and circulate a paper regarding the new BR fee structure to all stakeholders.

The Chair thanked the members for their active participation and the Board meeting of the Baa Atoll Conservation Fund Board came to a close at 02.35pm.

Annex 1

Participant's List

	Name	Designation	Organization
1.	Ibrahim Naeem	Director General (Chair)	Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve Office
2.	Ahmed Afrah	President	Baa Atoll Council
3.	Abdulla Rasheed	Assistant Director	Local Government Authority
4.	Ahmed Shahid	Member	National Boating Association of Maldives
5.	Abdulla Shibau	Fund Manager	Baa Atoll Conservation Fund
6.	Shafee Ali	Outreach Officer	BR Office
7.	Maishaan Ahmed	Member	NGO Representative
8.	Muhusina A. Rahman	Director	MoTE
9	Shahula Ali	Assistant Director	BR Office
10.	Ahmed Shan	Conservation Officer	BR Office
11.	Shafna Abdul Fathah	Accounts Officer	BR Office

Annex 2

Agenda

1. Welcome and Opening Remarks
2. Presentation by BACF
3. Presentation by BR Office
4. Presentation of Br Workplan 2025 and Budget
5. Discussion on Baa Atoll BR fee structure
6. Other Matters