

ANNUAL REPORT 2019

Baa Atoll Conservation Fund

The year 2019 was an important period in the continued development of the Baa Atoll Conservation Fund (BACF) and the implementation of the objectives of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve.

During the year, BACF continued to support conservation, sustainable development, community participation and protected-area management across Baa Atoll. The Fund's activities reflected its core purpose of providing financial support for initiatives that contribute to the long-term conservation and sustainable development of Baa Atoll as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

A significant focus during 2019 was the strengthening of community-based development. The BACF Board approved an allocation of MVR 3 million under the 2019 grant programme, with the Baa Atoll Council identified as the principal grantee. The subsequent proposal to develop two-bedroom "Biosphere" apartments on all 13 inhabited islands represented an important effort to ensure that BACF support generated tangible benefits throughout the atoll.

The year also saw continued progress in protected-area management, including the implementation of the Mendhoo Region Management Plan. The Manta Festival in Eydhafushi brought together communities, schools, resorts and conservation organisations to promote awareness of manta rays and marine conservation. In addition, participation in the Annual Exchange Programme for Parks strengthened professional learning and cooperation among protected-area practitioners from different parts of the Maldives.

BACF also continued to generate conservation financing through Hanifaru Access Permits, Biosphere Reserve partnership fees, tour guide examination fees and photography and videography permits. These revenues enabled the Fund to support its operational responsibilities and contribute to conservation and community programmes.

The activities undertaken during 2019 demonstrated the importance of partnerships between government institutions, local councils, communities, tourism operators, conservation organisations, schools and other stakeholders. Such cooperation remains fundamental to achieving the long-term objectives of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve.

Abdulla Shibau
Baa Atoll Conservation Fund

2. BACF BOARD GOVERNANCE

The BACF Board continued to provide strategic direction and oversight of the Fund during 2019. Two Board meetings were recorded during the year, on 28 January 2019 and 18 July 2019.

The Board's deliberations covered the 2019 grant programme, the Periodic Review of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve, the BR Office workplan and budget, tourism-sector partnerships, dive training opportunities, and community development.

The Board's decisions reflected an integrated approach to conservation, recognising that the long-term success of the Biosphere Reserve depends not only on environmental protection but also on community participation, sustainable livelihoods, capacity building and responsible tourism.

3. BACF BOARD MEETING – 28 JANUARY 2019

The BACF Board convened on **28 January 2019** to consider the 2019 grant programme and other matters relating to the management and development of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve.

The Board agreed that BACF grants should support communities during 2019 and that the **Baa Atoll Council** should be the principal grant recipient for the cycle.

The Board approved the following decisions:

1. MVR 3,000,000 was approved for allocation as BACF grants under the 2019 Grant Cycle.
2. The next BACF grant cycle was to be officially announced in April 2019.
3. Priority was to be given to **the Baa Atoll Council** as the grant recipient for 2019.
4. The Baa Atoll Council was requested to consult all Island Councils and develop tangible outputs benefiting all islands of Baa Atoll.
5. Resorts in Baa Atoll were to be encouraged to **become partners of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve.** The Board discussed the relationship between BR partnership and discounted Hanifaru Access Permits for dive schools.
6. Stakeholders were to be informed about the Periodic Review of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve, and their support sought in maintaining and strengthening the Reserve's UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status.

The decisions demonstrated the Board's emphasis on strengthening community participation, tourism-sector engagement and stakeholder support for the long-term management of the Biosphere Reserve.

4. BACF GRANT PROGRAMME 2019

Development of "Biosphere" Apartments

At its second meeting of the year, held on 18 July 2019, the BACF Board considered a proposal presented by the Baa Atoll Council to develop two-bedroom apartments on all 13 inhabited islands of Baa Atoll.

The proposal followed the Board's January decision to allocate MVR 3 million under the 2019 BACF Grant Cycle and provided a practical mechanism for ensuring that the grant programme generated tangible community-level benefits across the atoll.

The Board approved:

- Development of two-bedroom apartments on all 13 inhabited islands.

- Transfer of MVR 3,000,000 from BACF to the Baa Atoll Council following the signing of a formal agreement between BACF and the Council.
- A matching contribution by the Baa Atoll Council equivalent to the BACF allocation.
- Registration of all land plots allocated for the development under the respective Island Councils before construction commenced.
- The apartments to carry the name "Biosphere" on each island.
- The Baa Atoll Council to undertake all necessary work relating to the development and keep BACF informed of progress.

Significance of the Initiative

The initiative represented a significant community-development component of BACF's work. By supporting development across all 13 inhabited islands, the programme sought to distribute the benefits of conservation financing throughout Baa Atoll.

The matching-fund arrangement also strengthened cooperation between BACF and the Baa Atoll Council, while the use of **the "Biosphere"** identity connected community infrastructure with the wider objectives and identity of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve.

The initiative demonstrated BACF's approach of linking conservation financing with tangible community benefits and sustainable development.

5. MANTA FESTIVAL – EYDHAFUSHI

A Manta Festival was undertaken in Eydhafushi through a partnership between the Baa Atoll Council, the Manta Trust and the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve Office.

The festival was designed to promote awareness of manta rays and the importance of conserving the marine ecosystems upon which these species depend. It provided a platform for communities, schools, tourism establishments, NGOs and conservation practitioners to engage in marine conservation and environmental awareness.

Participation was broad and included:

- 14 resorts
- 12 schools from Baa Atoll
- 8 NGOs
- 2 schools from Raa Atoll

The participation of schools was particularly significant in promoting environmental education among young people and increasing awareness of manta rays, coral reefs and marine biodiversity.

The participation of resorts and NGOs also demonstrated the important role of the tourism sector and civil society in supporting marine conservation. In Baa Atoll, manta rays are an important part of the area's marine biodiversity and are also closely associated with the region's tourism identity.

The involvement of schools from Raa Atoll further demonstrated the potential for conservation initiatives to extend beyond administrative boundaries and promote wider awareness of marine conservation in the Maldives.

The festival contributed to the objectives of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve by strengthening environmental education, public awareness, community participation and sustainable tourism partnerships.

6. MENDHOO REGION MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Mendhoo Region Management Plan came into effect in 2019, marking an important development in the active management of protected areas within Baa Atoll.

The Mendhoo protected area encompasses Mendhoo Island and surrounding reef areas, Mendhoo Binmatheefaru, Kamburu/Kanburu Faru and Nibiligaa. The region consists of interconnected island, reef, lagoon and sandbank habitats that support a variety of marine and terrestrial species.

Ecological Importance

Mendhoo is particularly important for marine biodiversity and turtle conservation. The area supports coral reef ecosystems and associated marine organisms and provides habitat for a variety of marine species.

The region is also significant for green turtles and hawksbill turtles, with island and sandbank habitats providing nesting and breeding areas.

The islands and sandbanks additionally provide important habitat for seabirds. Nibiligaa and other parts of the region support roosting, nesting and feeding opportunities for resident and migratory seabirds, including several tern species and the Lesser Frigatebird.

These ecological characteristics make the Mendhoo Region an important component of the protected-area network supporting the conservation objectives of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve.

Management Significance

The introduction of the Mendhoo Region Management Plan represented an important step towards **active and structured protected-area management**.

The plan provided a framework for managing activities within the protected area, strengthening monitoring and compliance, guiding appropriate use, and improving coordination among authorities and stakeholders.

It also supported the wider Biosphere Reserve approach of balancing conservation with appropriate sustainable use and community interests.

The commencement of the plan in 2019 therefore represented a significant milestone in the continued development of Baa Atoll's protected-area management system.

7. ANNUAL EXCHANGE PROGRAMME FOR PARKS

In November **2019**, the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve Office hosted the Annual Exchange Programme for Parks, which included a two-day workshop in Eydhafushi supported by IUCN Maldives and Environmental Prorection Agency.

The programme brought together protected-area practitioners and representatives from Baa Atoll, South Ari Atoll, Addu and Fuvahmulah.

The programme provided an opportunity for participants to exchange practical experiences and discuss common challenges associated with the management of protected and environmentally sensitive areas.

Topics addressed through the exchange included:

- protected-area management;
- environmental monitoring;

- enforcement and compliance;
- visitor and tourism management;
- stakeholder engagement;
- community participation;
- conservation awareness; and
- sharing lessons and management experiences.

The participation of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve Office provided an opportunity to share experience from managing protected areas in Baa Atoll while learning from approaches applied in other parts of the Maldives.

Outcomes

The programme:

- strengthened knowledge sharing among protected-area practitioners;
- provided opportunities to exchange practical management experiences;
- improved understanding of common conservation and management challenges;
- strengthened professional networks among protected-area practitioners;
- identified approaches that could be considered for application in Baa Atoll; and
- contributed to institutional learning and capacity building.

The exchange programme supported the development of a stronger national network of protected-area practitioners and contributed to continued improvement of protected-area management.

8. FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

The financial information provided for the period records a **running capital of MVR 8,919,662.29**, followed by total income of **MVR 1,998,342.00**.

Income

Income	
Sale of Hanifaru Access Permits	601,873.00
BR Partnership Fees	
Resorts, Dives Schools and Liveaboards	30,610.00
Tour Guide Exam Registration Fees	6,970.00
Photography and Videography permits	26,985.00
Total Income	**666,438.00**

The Fund continued to generate revenue primarily through Hanifaru Access Permits and Biosphere Reserve partnership fees, supplemented by tour guide examination registration and photography and videography permits.

9. EXPENDITURE

BACF Management Costs	
Salary and Allowances	**479,819.23**
Travel and Transport	
Internal/Sea	215,573.50
Internal/Air	129,504.02
Internal/Land	100.00

Overseas Travel	234,797.82
	579,975.34
OFFICE Management Costs	
Office Stationery	8,056.00
Meeting,Workshops and Seminars	30,978.65
Training	81,976.36
Miscellaneous Expenses	10,303.40
Priniting Costs	13,398.40
Advertisements and Announcements	
Bank Charges	924.60
Fuel	73,583.72
	219,221.13
Maintenance	
BR Vessel	77,751.02
Machinery and Equipment	3,900.01
Spareparts	3,040.97
	84,692.00
Procurement of Goods	
Machinery and Equipment	10,849.99
IT related hardware	21,350.00
	32,199.99
Programmes	
Celebrations od Events/Occassions	3,500.00
Community Programmes	13,216.62
	13,216.62
Total Expenditure	**1,409,124.31**

10. FINANCIAL AND PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

The financial performance during the reporting period demonstrates the continuing role of BACF as an important mechanism for generating and managing dedicated conservation financing for Baa Atoll.

Income from Hanifaru Access Permits and Biosphere Reserve partnership fees reflected the important relationship between protected-area management, sustainable tourism and conservation financing.

At the same time, BACF's expenditure supported the operational requirements necessary to deliver conservation and community programmes, including staff, transport, vessel maintenance, office operations, equipment and community activities.

The financial resources managed by BACF therefore supported both the institutional requirements of the Fund and the broader objectives of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve.

11. CONCLUSION

The year 2019 demonstrated the growing role of the Baa Atoll Conservation Fund in supporting the practical implementation of the objectives of the Baa Atoll Biosphere Reserve.

The combination of community grants, protected-area management, marine conservation, environmental education, stakeholder partnerships and conservation financing reflected an increasingly integrated approach to managing Baa Atoll's natural resources.

The MVR 3 million community grant allocation and the proposed development of Biosphere apartments across all 13 inhabited islands represented a significant investment in community-level development. At the same time, the Mendhoo Region Management Plan strengthened the framework for protected-area management, while the Manta Festival and Parks Exchange Programme contributed to awareness, capacity building and cooperation.

Together, these initiatives demonstrated the importance of maintaining strong partnerships between local communities, Island Councils, the Baa Atoll Council, government authorities, conservation organisations, schools and the tourism sector.

BACF's activities during 2019 therefore contributed not only to the financial sustainability of conservation initiatives but also to the broader vision of Baa Atoll as a model of integrated atoll conservation and sustainable development.



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