

## Dive Tourism

### Environmental Best Practice Guidelines

#### Background

The focus of these guidelines is the safeguarding of the marine habitats and the flora and fauna that live there.

St Helena has a unique marine environment with a high number of endemic species. Unless tourism is managed effectively it can have damaging effects on the environment negating the positive influences in the form of increased awareness. To maintain increased tourism (and hence revenue) it is imperative to protect the product people are coming to see.

Increasing numbers of divers can potentially cause damage to sensitive benthic organisms through careless finning, especially through confined areas such as swim throughs, arches and caves. Accreditation of marine tourism business through raising public awareness, including leaflets giving guidelines on dive best practices will help highlight the importance of detailed dive briefings, good buoyancy control and consideration of fragile marine species.

Scuba divers often like to dive in and around wrecks. The Protection of Wrecks and Marine Archaeological Heritage Ordinance enacted in 2014 protects these areas from people taking artefacts, from damage caused by divers penetrating the wrecks or from damage due to sand extraction. It also protects the ground fish species on the wrecks from spearfishing or line fishing.

Visitor education is an important part of the visitor experience. Marine Tour Operators and their staff shall demonstrate stewardship and role modelling both above and below the water in areas that they visit by practicing environmentally sustainable behaviour and by managing their diver clientele's consciousness of this. If environmentally unsustainable practices are observed or discovered, staff members shall address them immediately – in the water or on board – by educating the divers on why and how to adjust their behaviour. This information is to be shared in a supportive and educational manner.

## Before the dive

### Diver Qualification

Operators should ensure that a suitably qualified person leads all dives. All visitors must always be accompanied by a St Helena resident diver. The Protection of Wrecks and Marine Archaeological Heritage Ordinance, 2014 defines resident divers as a certified diver who is lawfully on St Helena and who has been, or intends to remain, lawfully on the island for a period longer than six months. An operator is encouraged to ensure that a visitor or new diver in their group has proof of his/her training and diving experience by means of a logbook and relevant dive qualification certificates in order to demonstrate their awareness and to demonstrate the divers are sufficiently experienced. Where there is evidence of the above but the diver is "out of practice" or unfamiliar with their kit a precautionary approach is encouraged to minimise habitat damage. Observing that operators are verifying logbooks and observant of the above will be used as evidence during dive accreditation spot checks.

### Maximum diver numbers per site

A maximum of 20 divers are permitted per dive site. With a dive leader to diver ratio set at 1:10. If diving at the maximum number of divers, numbers should be split between two dive leaders taking different routes through the dive site.

### Dive site pressure

A maximum of two boats are permitted per site within 24 hours. Marine Tour Operators are encouraged to communicate with each other to ensure that the dive sites are not subjected to unsustainable human pressure.

### Briefing

During Marine tour operators pre-dive briefing the following environmental conditions should be included:

A description of the environmental and physical features of the dive site.

A description of the endemic and protected species and any rules that apply to the site.

Techniques (i.e. buoyancy control, trailing or unsecure kit) to minimise impact specific to the marine environment in which the diving activity is to be carried out, such as sandy bottoms, reef, etc.

Advice to photographers that the health of marine life takes precedence over any photography activity.

Respect all marine life – look but do not touch and do not re-locate marine life.

Do not remove or collect empty shells as these provide homes for marine life.

Advise where to place any litter or cigarette butts.

### Anchoring and entry into water

When moorings are not available operators shall endeavour to anchor in sand or less fragile habitats. Anchoring should be done in the most sensitive manner possible. An in-water assessment should also be performed by a crew member immediately after anchoring so that the anchor and/or chain can be moved, if needed, before the dive activity begins. Necessary adjustments shall be made by the coxswain during the entire anchorage period to ensure that damage to habitat does not occur through dragging anchor or changes in wind direction except in the event of an emergency.

Operators are required to display the A (Alpha) flag internationally recognised "I have people in the water; keep well clear at slow speed" once divers have entered the water.

Water entry points and descent lines from boats shall lie over sand or rubble or in water of sufficient depth that divers can make adjustments and become neutrally buoyant before approaching the reef area in order to prevent contact with marine life.

### Restrictions on wrecks, areas of marine archaeological interest and protected artefacts

The Protection of Wrecks and Marine Archaeological Heritage Ordinance, 2014 prohibits the following:

Penetration of any protected wreck, tamper with, damage or remove any part of a protected wreck, or any object formerly contained in such wreck.

Deposit anything within a restricted area so as to fall to the sea bed which would, if it were to fall on the site of a wreck (whether it so falls or not), wholly or partly obliterate the site or obstruct access to it, or damage any part of the wreck.

Anchor any vessel within a restricted area otherwise than at a permanent anchor point, subject to any further restrictions under the Harbours Ordinance.

Conduct any spearfishing or fishing activities (other than bait fishing) within a restricted area.

Scuba dive within a restricted area unless such person is a St Helena resident diver or is accompanied by a St Helena resident diver.

### Restriction for caves & swim throughs/overhead environments

Caves arches and swim throughs are particularly vulnerable to disturbance from divers. They are home to the endemic orange up coral and fragile lace coral. It is important that marine tour operators ensure that divers are suitably experienced enough to enter these environments. Particular attention should be given to divers' buoyancy and any trailing equipment. Marine tour operators should encourage their clientele to have a torch with them when cave diving.

### Marine megafauna

Keep clear of free-swimming animals (such as devil rays, turtles, whales and whale sharks). In particular, do not ride, grab or block the path of these animals.

Under the 'POLICY FOR MARINE SPECIES INTERACTION ACTIVITIES ON ST HELENA ISLAND TO MINIMISE RISK OF INJURY AND DISTURBANCE' and formerly the 'environmental policy for whale shark (*rhincodon typus*), devil ray (*mobula tarapacana*) and cetacean interaction activities on St. Helena Island to minimize risk of injury and disturbance' the following is prohibited:

- The use of flash for underwater photography.
- Deliberate touching, chasing, or riding of whale sharks, mobula rays, whales, dolphins, turtles or other marine megafauna.
- Deliberate scuba diving with, touching, riding or feeding of whale sharks, whales and dolphins.

Further details on what to do if marine megafauna appear on dives can be found in the species specific best practice guidelines.

### Dumping

All equipment used in the dive and any food consumed after the diver or litter created as a result of this should be returned to the shore and stored or disposed of in the correct manner. Vessels should make special provisions for the disposal of cigarettes should they have a designated smoking area.

## Souvenirs

Dive operators must ensure that their divers take nothing but memories and pictures. Nothing should be removed from the marine environment unless the diver has approval and is able to provide a research permit to do so.

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