



BRIEFING NOTE

January, 2021

SUMMARY

In September 2019, the Government of the Maldives and the Blue Prosperity Coalition signed a Memorandum of Understanding that launched the Noo Raajje Program, a program to develop and implement solutions for long-term sustainable ocean management. This agreement set out to designate at least 20% of Maldivian waters through fully-protected marine protected areas, along with the necessary regulatory framework and a blue economy strategy.

In February 2020, the Program began with a nationwide expedition to assess the status of the Maldives coral reefs and fish species. Since then, work has focused on establishing the Governance framework (April), hiring local coordinators for the program (September), analysing expedition findings (ongoing), strategizing a communications plan (ongoing), hosting a public online launch (December), research for the legal assessment (ongoing) and holding conversations with local Government partners in order to understand national fisheries and blue economy priorities (ongoing).

Not surprisingly, the pandemic has delayed some programmatic works, including the organization of an introductory workshop on marine spatial planning. We anticipate we can achieve similar learning outcomes via webinars and hope to select and convene an MSP working group to facilitate the development of a Maldives MSP Roadmap with project timelines in January 2021.



GOVERNANCE

The Noo Raajje Program Leadership provides high-level supervision and includes Minister of Fisheries, Marine Resources & Agriculture Ms. Zaha Waheed, and the Policy Secretary Ms. Aminath Shauna or the acting Policy Secretary Ms. Sabra Noordeen at the President's Office on behalf of the Government of the Maldives, and the Executive Director of the Waitt Institute Dr. Kathryn Mengerink on behalf of the Blue Prosperity Coalition. The Noo Raajje Governance Committee comprised of high-level representation from 14 Government agencies, hosted by the President's Office and Chaired by the Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources & Agriculture to oversee decision-making throughout the marine spatial planning, fisheries management and blue economy development processes. In September 2020, the first Governance Committee meeting was held to adopt rules of engagement. The next meeting is planned for March 2021 to review findings from the scientific report and legal framework report. The Noo Raajje Steering Committee and Subcommittees comprised of technicians from 15 Government agencies, along with local Councilors and representatives from NGOs, academia, and private sector who have a stake in ocean management will act in an advisory capacity to provide technical input to the program. In November 2020, the first Steering Committee meeting was held to introduce the program and solicit participation via 5 Subcommittees: Marine Spatial Planning, Blue Economy and Sustainable Finance, Sustainable Fisheries, Communications and Capacity Building. It is expected the Subcommittees will meet as frequently as needed e.g. the MSP Subcommittee will convene in January 2021 on a potentially biweekly basis to advance MSP work-planning. Noo Raajje Program Administration is the operational arm of the program, responsible for developing and implementing workplans. Ms. Munshidha Ibrahim represents the Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture and Ms. Jauza Khaleel represents the President's Office. This group along the local Noo Raajje staff: Ms. Fathimath Nistharan Site Manager, Mr. Moosa Zameer Program Coordinator, and Ms. Maeesha Mohamed Administrative Coordinator; and Ms. Robin Ramdeen, Waitt Institute Program Manager for the Maldives represent the Noo Raajje Program Administration. Since April 2020 the Program Administration has been convening biweekly so as to advance work plans.

PILLARS OF WORK

Blue Economy

In July 2020, Waitt Institute introduced collaborators at the University of California Los Angeles, Institute of Environmental Sustainability to the Program leadership. The group began a discussion on Maldives' Blue Economy priorities. It was agreed that the correct path forward is for the Noo Raajje Program to work alongside the National Covid Taskforce for Economic Development to identify high priority blue economy projects. By September Waitt Institute had hired Dr. Angus Friday, Blue Economy Director who held a meeting with the Minister of Tourism and the Minister of Economic Development. A draft approach for Implementing a Blue Economy Strategy to the Government was developed and submitted in December 2020.

Ecological Science and Marine Spatial Planning

In February 2020, a team of Maldivian and international scientists surveyed 127 survey sites across many Maldivian atolls distributed between inhabited and uninhabited areas of the Maldives. The 3-week underwater expedition provided a systematic snapshot of coral reef health, with a focus on spatial gradients and gradients of human resource use. The priority is to continue data processing and analysis and to produce a draft outline for the coral reef assessment report with input and feedback from the Maldives Marine Research Institute. Additionally, a final segment of the expedition is tentatively planned for March 2021. The results of the expedition will provide ecological information to help guide marine spatial planning in the Maldives.



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Fisheries

In September 2020, Waitt Institute collaborators at the Environmental Markets Laboratory at University of California Santa Barbara worked with Minister Zaha Waheed and members of her staff to review 7 draft Fisheries Management Plans. In January 2021, Waitt's new Sustainable Fisheries Director will join and work alongside Government partners to identify priorities and collaborate on sustainable fisheries projects.

Communications

In July 2020, meetings were held with Mr. Ibrahim Hood Communications Director at the President's Office and Minister Zaha representing the Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture. The pair reviewed key messaging of the program, vetted the approvals process for press releases and other communications and agreed on a final logo for the program. In December 2020, a Noo RaaJje online program launch event was successfully executed. The event was opened by President Solih, used recorded clips from 10 stakeholders and had panelists speaking in both Dhivehi and English to appeal to large audience.

Legal

In July 2020, Waitt Institute contracted two local Maldivian lawyers along with a U.S.-based ocean law expert, to support the development of an in-depth legal assessment of the Maldives' existing legal framework as it relates to ocean management at the national, atoll and island levels. This assessment will provide a solid understanding of the legal foundation for developing an enforceable, comprehensive, and sustainably-financed marine spatial plan and blue economy strategy. A draft of the legal assessment will be presented for review by Government stakeholders in March 2021, with a final copy to be released in April 2021.

Capacity Building

In order to advance Maldivian ocean science through education, a free online Blue Prosperity Maldives Training Program is being designed and launched in 2021.

ANNEXES

1. Governance Committee members List
2. Steering Committee members List
3. Sub-Committees (5 Working Groups) List