

## **New online system is available to collect MPA user fees safely and easily; developed by former Bonaire National Marine Park manager**

A new online collection system for MPA user fees – gathering entrance charges, annual passes, day passes, dive tags, and other payments – is available to help managers collect the fees safely and easily. It also collects demographic and contact information on MPA users in an easy-to-access database. This latter feature allows managers to understand their user base and, if desired, engage again with previous visitors.

The system is called Reef Support. It was created by Ramón de León, who served for 11 years as manager of the Bonaire National Marine Park, off the Caribbean island of Bonaire. Although the system was designed originally for MPAs like Bonaire, where user fees are mandatory, Reef Support can also be used to collect voluntary donations. This serves MPAs that lack the enabling legislation to support mandatory user fees.

De León developed Reef Support after performing a feasibility study financed by Bloomberg Philanthropies. The system has been tested at several MPAs in the Caribbean and is in use by St. Maarten Nature Foundation and the Man of War Shoal Marine Park – you can see it in action here. It is also in use by the White River Fish Sanctuary in Ocho Rios, Jamaica; Parque Nacional Submarino La Caleta in the Dominican Republic; and Sosua Bay Reserve and Preservation Zone, also in the Dominican Republic.

MPA News spoke with de León about the development of Reef Support, what it offers to MPA managers, and why the alternative of just having a PayPal link on your MPA's webpage may not be particularly useful.

### **MPA News: Ramón, you were the manager of Bonaire National Marine Park from 2004 to 2015. How did that experience lead to your developing Reef Support?**

**Ramón de León:** Bonaire National Marine Park has been financially self-sustaining since 1992, almost entirely from collecting user fees. The MPA has a set of customers who are hardcore divers: 50% of the divers who come to Bonaire make around 20 dives a week. So it is easy to connect with them through the dive operators on the island, where the marine park sells its dive tags (US\$45 per calendar year).

The reality, though, is that the over-the-counter dive tag system is very expensive to operate. It consumes more than 7% of the MPA's total income. When I was the park manager, we used to spend almost \$50,000 per year just to make the dive tags.

And there are other problems. The dive operators who are in charge of selling the tags for the marine park authority, although very supportive of the work of the MPA, are tired of having to sell these tags over the counter, which requires time and administration. The other issue is safety. The mechanism here is that most of the transactions are on a cash basis, which puts operators and rangers in the position of having to handle large amounts of cash. There was no other option in 1992 when the system started. Incidentally, back then there were just eight dive operators; now there are more than 20.

Also, when I joined Bonaire Marine Park in 2004, only divers were required to pay user fees. Now everyone who uses the park pays. So the rangers don't only have to go to dive operators now – they also have to visit kayaking, windsurfing, kitesurfing, and snorkeling operators. It is a heavy day when the ranger has to visit more than 50 operators to deliver tags.

### **So your online system is designed to make user fee collection simpler and safer. What does it look like for users, and how do they apply the products they pay for?**

**De León:** The payment page is customized to each MPA. You have the logo of the park, a banner where you can put a picture, and information about the MPA. And you have a choice of the products available, like single-day passes, weekly passes, and so forth. When users click to pay for these products, they receive a unique numbered ticket with a code that allows park rangers and tourism operators to verify ticket validity, so it's easy to enforce. The same verification can be done by entering a visitor's name in the system database.

## **How much does this system cost MPAs to use?**

**De León:** I'm not intending to make money here. I tried to build a system that was as inexpensive to use as possible, so that almost all of the money coming in would reach MPA people in the field. Reef Support is basically just a webpage with an exclusive ticketing system, a credit card processor, and a database that collects user information.

For MPAs that use the system, their percentage of the revenue will range from 85% to 90%, depending on a range of factors. The remaining percentage will cover the costs of the website hosting, banking costs (from credit card processing), and database management. There is no upfront implementation cost for MPAs.

## **Many MPAs are not supported by legislation that enables them to collect user fees. How can Reef Support help them?**

**De León:** The reason that most MPAs do not have a user fee system in place is because they do not have the lobbying power to pass enabling legislation to collect such user fees. The Reef Support system does not require enabling legislation. It can be used to collect donations instead. These donations will not be mandatory and are not enforceable, but MPAs can still potentially raise a significant amount of money this way.

So if you are a manager of an MPA and have a lot of visitors, but you don't have any enabling legislation to charge a mandatory user fee, you can still use this tool. In this case, your work as an MPA manager will be to go to your local hotels and tourism operators and convince them to help spread the link for donations to your MPA. We're doing that in Jamaica now, starting with the White River Fish Sanctuary in Ocho Rios, which has thousands of visitors a year but no user fee legislation. The manager there is now convincing hotels, marine recreation providers, and rental car operators to put the donation link on their webpages. So when users are sitting at home planning their next trip to Jamaica, they'll see on every webpage they visit that they can support the local MPA in Ocho Rios.

For MPAs that do use Reef Support for donations, potentially they could incentivize such donations by offering a bonus to donors. It could be a discount for entering a park visitor center, or for visiting another park, or something else.

## **A number of MPA websites already have links to allow visitors to donate to them, often using PayPal. How is Reef Support different from that?**

**De León:** Webpages for MPAs are not very well visited. Most tourists when they are planning a destination holiday go to a hotel page, dive operator, or rental car page – not an MPA page. So a PayPal link on an MPA page will not accomplish much.

The idea behind Reef Support is to direct users to MPAs from *where they are* – the pages for hotels, rental cars, and other tourism businesses. In addition, Reef Support generates a unique ticket that is enforceable, and collects users' demographic data. In contrast, with PayPal you only get the money.

### **For more information:**

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