

Turning the tide on ghost gear

[23rd March 2020]

IIPNLF and Olive Ridley Project pledge to jointly tackle the scourge of lost and abandoned fishing gear that's haunting environmentally critical marine life and habitats.

An important Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been finalised between the International Pole & Line Foundation (IPNLF) and the Olive Ridley Project (ORP) that will seek to assess the destruction caused to fragile marine life in the Maldives by abandoned, lost or otherwise discarded fishing gear, while also determining the best courses of action to mitigate this significant environmental threat.

Lost or abandoned fishing nets are widely considered to be the most harmful form of "ghost gear" because they can travel great distances in ocean currents while indiscriminately entangling, suffocating and killing many forms of marine life. In addition, once this type of pollution accumulates along coastlines it creates a barrier to critical habitats, like turtle nesting beaches.

In the Maldives, one-by-one catching methods have been the only permissible form of fishing since the advent of national fisheries laws. Nonetheless, large drifting ghost nets are becoming an increasingly serious threat to the nation's rich marine megafauna. This is largely due to the accumulating volumes of ghost nets and "attractors" made of purse seine netting which are attached below fish aggregating devices (FADs). Ghost nets from both of these sources are drifting into the nation's waters after being abandoned, lost or discarded by purse seine and gillnet tuna fisheries operating elsewhere in the Indian Ocean.

"We are excited to begin this journey with IPNLF and hope that we can collectively showcase the scale of this issue in the Maldives. The number of sea turtles rescued by ORP over the years is quite frankly shocking! We can no longer bury our heads in the sand, now is the time for change."

- Martin Stelfox, Founder and CEO of the Olive Ridley Project



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These abandoned, lost or discarded nets and FADs collectively impact a wide range of environmentally threatened species in Maldivian waters, and none more so than the Olive Ridley turtle. Despite many claims by industrial fleets of transitioning to non-entangling FADs, and the use of less harmful biodegradable fishing gears, the entanglement rates of Olive Ridley Turtles in ghost nets in the Maldives are still extremely high, with 601 turtles discovered entangled in just 732 encountered ghost nets to date. In response to this persistent threat, the outlined terms of the MOU are designed to strengthen the commitments of both NGOs to collectively ensure that ghost nets are removed from the ocean.

After years of lobbying such issues within relevant policy forums, both IPNLF and ORP have set out the Memorandum to define collaborative measures that the two parties will engage to collect valuable data on the source of ghost nets entering the Maldives, and evidence the impact of polluting fisheries. This work will utilise on the ground surveys and at sea observation studies conducted with the support of one-by-one tuna fishing vessels. The agreement will also allow scope for facilitating new practical workshops that enable ORP's best practices for turtle disentanglement from nets to be implemented among one-by-one fishers in the Maldives. This will also increase the likelihood that entangled Olive Ridley turtles and other affected endangered animals in the region survive their ordeals with abandoned ghost fishing nets.

“Net fishing has long been banned in Maldivian waters, which means that local fishers pose the lowest risk of ghost fishing even if their gear is accidentally lost at sea. Nevertheless, one-by-one tuna fishing vessels are encountering vast amounts of ghost nets and other waste originating from industrial fishing operations, which are not using one-by-one fishing methods and being conducted beyond the Maldivian exclusive economic zone. Through this Memorandum of Understanding and its subsequent actions, IPNLF and ORP aim to shine a spotlight on the destruction being inflicted on marine environments by irresponsible foreign fleets, and IPNLF plan to continue lobbying Regional Fisheries Management Organisations for practical solutions that could help remedy this failing.”

- Zacari Edwards, IPNLF Socio Economic Manager

The Memorandum builds on the recently announced initiative to collect and upcycle ghost gear, funded by the inaugural Joanna Toole Ghost Gear Solutions Award.

ABOUT - Olive Ridley Project

The Olive Ridley Project was founded in 2013 by Biologist Martin Stelfox in response to the large amounts of entangled olive ridley sea turtles he encountered in the Maldives: He wanted to understand the phenomenon of olive ridley sea turtles drifting into the Maldives entangled in ghost nets and identify where the ghost nets originate from.

The Olive Ridley Project aims to protect and preserve the Indian Ocean from ghost nets by actively removing discarded fishing nets, rescuing and nursing entangled turtles back to health; educating local and scientific communities about the issue; identifying the origins of the ghost nets and target these locations to change their fishing techniques; and promoting end of life recycling of fishing nets.

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