



Ref no. (IUL)203-ERC/1/2023/39

PRESS RELEASE

Sea turtle nesting beach monitoring at L.Gaadhoo

The Environmental Protection Agency of Maldives (EPA), together with sea turtle conservation NGO Olive Ridley Project - Maldives (ORP), has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Laamu Atoll Council, L. Fonadhoo Council, and Agro National Corporation (AgroNat) outlining the plans to protect the sea turtle nesting beach in L. Gaadhoo. As per the MoU, EPA and ORP have jointly appointed a Sea Turtle Ranger and Community Officer to conduct regular nesting surveys on Gaadhoo's southwestern beach, locally known as the *Velaa Heylhi*. In addition to collecting data on sea turtle nesting and poaching on L.Gaadhoo, the Ranger will also be conducting education and awareness sessions in Laamu Atoll with a special focus on L.Fonadhoo and L.Gan.

The sea turtle nesting beach of L.Gaadhoo has been identified as one of the most significant green sea turtle nesting hotspots in the Maldives, with an annual estimate of 283 nests recorded in the 1980s. Traditionally, the inhabitants of the island were custodians of the beach, and had previously conducted nesting beach monitoring to protect the area from poachers. Local beach monitoring efforts ceased following the 2006 ban on egg harvesting, leading to uncontrolled poaching on the island. In 2015, the residents of the island were relocated to neighboring L. Fonadhoo, resulting in increased vulnerability for poaching in L.Gaadhoo. The Olive Ridley Project has been conducting ad-hoc nesting surveys on Gaadhoo since 2018, with results indicating an increase in poaching, with the highest recorded incidents in 2022 with 61% of nests poached.

L.Gaadhoo remained an uninhabited island within the administrative boundary of Laamu Atoll Council, until the island was leased for agricultural purposes to AgroNat in 2021. During this period, the Atoll Council together with the community had managed the island, and subsequently proposed L.Gaadhoo for Protected Area designation as an environmentally and historically significant site. The sea turtle nesting beach together with the surrounding seagrass beds, and the island's mangrove site were declared as 'Protected Areas' in December 2022 under the Environmental Protection & Preservation Act (4/93).

Under the MoU, the EPA will work with the community to address poaching through targeted monitoring activities to strengthen law enforcement. Additionally, EPA and ORP will also be conducting a historical knowledge survey to document how the former residents of Gaadhoo monitored and managed nests on their island before and after the government's egg harvesting ban in 2006. The study also aims to better understand the expectations and recommendations of former Gaadhoo residents for managing the protected areas on the island, which will inform the management plan for the Protected Areas within the island boundary. This project is supported by GEF Small Grants Programme implemented by UNDP Maldives, and Six Senses Laamu.

14th June 2023

