

Visitors Yarari Sanctuary can help record sightings marine life

In an effort to gather much needed information on local populations of whales, dolphins, manatees, sharks, rays and large groupers STINAPA Bonaire has developed a Marine Animal Monitoring Form which enables all visiting the Yarari Marine Mammal and Shark Sanctuary to contribute to the local monitoring of these species.

There has been a significant push in the past decade to collect data on the biodiversity of the Dutch Caribbean to improve the effectiveness of conservation measures. While a number of research projects have been led and completed by teams of scientists, such as the 2015 expedition to the Saba Bank, gathering long-term data on marine life is no easy feat. Citizen science, whereby the public participates in scientific research through the collection and sharing of data, has proven to be a real asset to the monitoring of marine mammals and large predators such as sharks. The SharksCount program by SharkSavers and WildAid (<http://www.sharksavers.org/en/our-programs/sharkscount/>) and REEF (<https://www.reef.org>) for example, have had great success engaging the general public in shark monitoring while gathering important data on local shark abundance and diversity.

On Bonaire, dolphin sightings have been collected independently by Ron Sewell since 1999, however the data has not been analyzed yet. The establishment of the Yarari Marine Mammal and Shark Sanctuary in 2015 in the waters of Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba is providing a new opportunity to motivate the local community in becoming involved with the monitoring of marine wildlife. Consequently, Emil Ren (intern at STINAPA Bonaire) has developed a Marine Animal Monitoring Form so

that anyone diving, swimming or boating in the Yarari Sanctuary can record sightings of large marine wildlife. The Marine Animal Monitoring Form developed by STINAPA Bonaire (the form can be found here: <https://www.dcnanature.org/report-marine-animal>) is a simple online sightings reporting form for marine mammals (whales, dolphins, manatees) and also sharks, rays and large groupers. Those filling out the form are asked to include details on the species, the location and depth of the sighting, the number of animals spotted, as well as to grade the certainty of the observation. This form is for sightings of live animals only – information on stranded, dead or entangled animals should still be reported to the island's marine park organization.

Data gathered through the Marine Animal Monitoring Form will provide invaluable information on local population trends and distribution of marine wildlife in the Yarari Sanctuary while building awareness amongst visitors and the local community. DCNA has been calling upon local dive shops on Bonaire to contribute all their sightings. The form has been successful in its first month of use, with over 35 sightings already recorded. More than half of the sightings have been of sharks, rays and groupers, with the rest consisting mostly of dolphins and one sperm whale. Long-term information on the relative abundance and location of marine mammals and sharks will provide essential information to help protect and manage these species, and help establish a baseline to measure the success of future conservation measures. All marine parks within the Dutch Caribbean have been invited to use the form.

REPORT YOUR SIGHTINGS

The Marine Animal Monitoring Form

<https://www.dcnanature.org/report-marine-animal>

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