

BABAGANOUSH RETURNS - MIRACULOUS MANTA RAY RECOVERY

One of the Maldives best known and loved manta rays, Babaganoush (MV-MA-0033), surprised and delighted Manta Trust researchers this week when he reappeared at a popular tourist spot, six months after sustaining what were thought to be fatal injuries from a speedboat strike.



In November 2018, Babaganoush was filmed by the Manta Trust in Hanifaru Bay, having suffered horrific injuries from a speedboat strike. Manta rays are vulnerable to boat strikes in the Maldives whilst feeding or travelling at the Ocean surface, especially outside of the few small protected areas that exist where boat speed restrictions are in place. Baba sustained some of the worst injuries the Manta Trust team have ever recorded on a living manta ray; the boat's propeller had cut so deep into his body cavity that his internal organs were exposed.

Incredibly, on the 4th May, after six months without any sightings, Babaganoush made a triumphant return to Hanifaru Bay looking healthy and extremely well healed. The Manta Trust team could not be happier that he has survived! These records illustrate the remarkable ability of manta rays to resist infection and heal, allowing them to survive (at least sometimes) injuries that we'd assumed would prove fatal. However, it also illustrates the negative indirect impacts which humans are increasingly having on these species globally, even in countries where they are lucky enough to receive national protections from fishing and other direct threats.

"We are thrilled that Babaganoush is alive and well, but unfortunately many other manta rays, sea turtles, and whale sharks are not so lucky. Each year, as speedboat traffic significantly increases in the Maldives, where little-to-no speed limits are in place throughout much of the country, the nation's marine life faces a serious threat from the unregulated impacts of rapid human development. Urgent actions are therefore needed by the Maldives government to implement effective management regulations, especially at key megafauna aggregation sites, and along migratory corridors. On land, drivers are not allowed to drive their cars as fast as they want through a national park or urban areas, so why does the same



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principle not apply inside a marine reserve, or at other areas where marine life and in-water humans are most vulnerable”? says Manta Trust Founder and CEO, Dr. Guy Stevens.

Babaganoush is one of over 5000 reef manta rays (*Mobula alfredi*) identified by the Manta Trust's Maldivian Manta Ray Project, and he has been sighted over 200 times since 2005 (each manta ray is uniquely identifiable by the spot patterns on its belly). Reef manta rays are intelligent, gentle giants, growing up to four metres in width they feed on tiny zooplanktonic prey by filtering it from the water using specially modified gills. Sadly, throughout their range, manta rays have been heavily fished over the last few decades. Targeted for their gill plates, which are used in Traditional Asian Medicines, and caught incidentally by fisheries targeting other species, these species are now listed as 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species.

The Manta Trust is working with projects around the world to find solutions to the threats facing these species globally, including the growing impacts of tourism. One vital conservation tool is helping countries to seek economic alternatives to fisheries. Manta tourism provides many countries and governments throughout the range of manta rays with a strong economic incentive to protect these species and their habitats. However, this tourism also needs to be managed if it is to be sustainable. The Maldives, which is home to the world's largest population of reef manta rays, where these species are protected nationally, has been taking some positive steps to conserve its native marine life and encourage responsible tourism. However, the pressures on the Maldives' coral reefs and their inhabitants are rapidly increasing, and much greater efforts are required if this ecosystem is to not become 'loved to death'. Hanifaru Bay, a location known to seasonally attract huge aggregations of manta rays, and which was recently featured on the BBC's Blue Planet II series, was declared a marine protected area (MPA) in 2009. In 2010, regulations at this site were put in place to minimise the impacts of tourism on the aggregating manta rays. These measures include restrictions on visitor numbers, a ban on SCUBA diving and fishing, with strict enforcement by on-site rangers. As a result, this site has become a model example of how well-managed tourism can, and should, benefit both marine life and the local economy. However, outside of this small MPA, the rapidly growing pressures of development and climate breakdown upon the natural resources and the biodiversity of the Maldives should be a serious concern for a nation that's economy is so heavily reliant on the health of its marine environment.

The Manta Trust continues to work with local communities, tourism operators, and the Maldives government to find tangible solutions to the issue of tourism development, but this work is not easy, and we have very limited resources. If you care about Babaganoush, the rest of the Maldives manta rays, and more broadly our Oceans, you can help to support our work by [adopting Babaganoush today](#). The Manta Trust's [How to Swim with Manta Rays](#) website also gives clear guidelines on how divers and snorkelers should behave in the water to ensure their presence minimises disturbance to any encountered manta rays. Tourism operators can download free resources to help run responsible manta trips and can register to be listed as a responsible operator.

- Adopt Babaganoush - <https://www.mantatrust.org/adopt-a-manta>

The Manta Trust is a non-profit, conservation and research oriented organization dedicated to protecting manta and mobula rays and their habitats.

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- How to Swim with Mantas - <https://swimwithmantas.org/>

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- **Manta Trust:** founded in 2011, the Manta Trust is a UK-based manta ray conservation charity, co-ordinating global research and conservation efforts via research projects in over 25 countries worldwide. Our mission is to conserve manta and devil rays, and the habitats they depend on, through research, education and collaboration. www.mantatrust.org.
- **Maldivian Manta Ray Project:** The MMRP is the Manta Trust's flagship research project. After more than a decade of research across this island nation, the MMRP has evolved into one of the largest and longest-standing manta conservation groups in the Maldives: www.mantatrust.org/maldives.
- **PRESS KIT** – if you would like images and video footage of Babaganoush and his injuries, please contact Simon Hilbourne, Media & Communications Manager, Manta Trust simon@mantatrust.org