

AN INTERVIEW WITH...

EMELINE BOUCHET

RESIDENT MARINE BIOLOGIST AT VELAA PRIVATE ISLAND

Making a difference and supporting unique environments and wildlife are at the forefront for many travellers. Travel Dine Relax caught up with Emeline Bouchet, Resident Marine Biologist at Velaa Private Island to hear more about how this unique destination is playing an active part in supporting its local environment and educating visitors on the importance of conservation and ecosystems.

Tell us more about your role and what a typical day entails?

The most important part of my role is leading the Coral Restoration Project at Velaa, where we use the coral nursery technique, a two-stage process for coral propagation. This method had been chosen due to the shallowness of the lagoon and the structure of the natural reef. Firstly, corals are grown in a mid-water floating nursery, where they can increase in size substantially due to lack of predators and sedimentation, increased water flow, a good light source and removal of competitions, including algae. Once the corals have reached a healthy size, we then 'transplant' them back to the reef in the second stage whereby we glue them on the natural substrate using marine cement.

Throughout this process, my team and I regularly monitor the coral health and growth rates to track the progress of the programme and to quantify how much they grow throughout the nursery phase. We do this by looking at the percentage of healthy tissue and whether corals are bleaching or not. We also record if they are any disease and if corals are facing any predation or competition. With the help of this programme, the corals have then proven to more than triple in size within six to nine months.

Another part of my role as a marine biologist involves Sea Turtle and Manta ray conservation on the island. Velaa means Green Sea Turtle in Dhivehi, the native language, as several females nest on the island between March and August each year.

Coming on land to lay eggs drains the female of energy, we try to make the process less stressful by keeping our distance, avoiding pictures with flash and using red light in order to increase the nesting success rate at Velaa.

With so many travel destinations reliant on beautiful natural surroundings, such as the oceans and sea, how important is it that they play an active role in supporting the local ecosystem?

In the Maldives in particular, it's very important that hotel developments and operations are respectful of the environment and even more important that they play an active role in supporting the local ecosystem through eco-friendly practices. At Velaa Private Island, we believe the support and protection of the natural environment all starts with education and allowing our guests to get involved in these activities first-hand. This is why we believe hosting regular workshops, covering issues such as plastic pollution and ocean conservation and allowing guests to shadow in-house coral biologists for the day, has been so successful in helping guests understand the root of the problem, before taking action themselves.

At Velaa, we also work in cooperation with the Oliver Ridley Project and Manta Trust, whereby anytime we have an encounter with manta rays or turtles on the house reef or a nearby island, we send information and images to the relevant organisations for identification. >>>



Emeline Bouchet,
Resident Marine Biologist
Velaa Private Island