

Voluntary Standards as a Tool for Increasing the Sustainability of the Marine Recreation Industry and Improving MPA Effectiveness in Hawaii and Mesoamerica

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Abstract. Standards have a long history of improving service quality and safety in a wide range of industries. Successful businesses benefit from standards both by actively participating in the standardization process and by using standards as strategic market instruments. The Coral Reef Alliance (CORAL) recently completed a process in which marine recreation industry stakeholders in Hawaii and along the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef (MAR) worked in unprecedented collaborations to develop voluntary standards that will measurably improve and sustain environmental performance in scuba diving, snorkeling, boat operations, and marine life viewing. Engaging a standards committee comprised of representatives from marine recreation, conservation NGOs, tourism industry associations, marine recreation suppliers, marine park managers and government agencies, scientists, divers, local community groups, and traditional communities, CORAL is now testing the implementation of these standards and providing technical and financial support for locally based conservation initiatives. It is expected that this process will enhance adoption of standards throughout the marine recreation industry, increase industry support for marine protected areas (MPAs), and lead to the development of extensive conservation alliances, which enhance MPA effectiveness and improve the economic and environmental sustainability of marine recreation in Hawaii and Mesoamerica.

Key words: Standards, Sustainability, Tourism, Hawaii, Mesoamerica

Introduction

In areas of high-volume tourism, repeated direct contact with the reef poses an immediate threat. Hundreds of boat groundings and hundreds of thousands of tourist interactions each year reduce sections of coral reef to rubble. Human contact also reduces coral's ability to cope with stressors such as rising sea temperatures and diseases.

The development of voluntary standards for marine recreation operations provides detailed requirements for environmentally friendly and safety-conscious marine tourism businesses in the areas of diving, snorkeling, boating, and marine life viewing. The voluntary standards are crafted to be flexible and can be used by a variety of groups, including:

- Concerned tourists: to help them choose sustainable and safe marine excursions
- Marine tourism businesses: to evaluate and improve their own practices
- Non-governmental organizations and governments: as a basis for creating their own standards

- Bulk purchasers like cruise ships: to select sustainable and safe business partners

This paper offers two contrasting case studies of how voluntary standards development can be embraced, as experienced in Mesoamerica, or initially rejected, as seen in Maui, Hawaii, by stakeholders. Key lessons learned in standards development are identified to assist with future initiatives. In addition, unique challenges to widespread standards implementation are identified. For example, the exponential growth of cruise ship tourism in recent years—carrying an estimated 6 million tourists to Mesoamerica in 2004 alone—presents a new impact that must be addressed in this region's overall marine conservation efforts. Ensuring cruise lines both support and contract with local tourism operators who implement the voluntary standards will be a critical test of long-term viability and efficacy of standards as a tool for resource managers.

Case Study -Mesoamerican Reef (MAR)

Material and Methods

CORAL facilitated a highly participatory process to develop the world's first Voluntary Standards for Marine Recreation in the MAR System—Scuba Diving Services, Snorkeling Services, and Recreational Boat Operations. Starting in early 2005, over 180 participants from across the four countries of Mesoamerica (Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras) representing marine tour operator associations, park managers and conservation NGOs, the cruise ship industry, scientists, concerned divers and individuals from the local communities worked together to develop and implement these voluntary standards and initiate local and regional conservation projects throughout Mesoamerica.

The widely recognized due process practices defined in the Standards Engineering Society's standard SES-2, Model Standards Development Procedure, were followed in developing these voluntary standards. All drafts, comments, discussions and balloting were accomplished online simultaneously in Spanish and English.

Existing guidelines, preferred practices, and codes of conduct that have been developed by a number of organizations were considered for adoption, but were found to be insufficiently prescriptive and specific. Their focus was directed more towards tourist behavior rather than the conduct and responsibilities of the marine recreation operators and their staff.

Additionally, with respect to the development of the *Voluntary Standards for Recreational Scuba Diving Services*, the European Committee for Standardization's EN 14467:2004, Requirements for Recreational Diving Service Providers, was thoroughly reviewed. However, it was determined that too many additions and exceptions would have to be incorporated to address sustainable tourism issues, particularly regarding the environment, that are critical to application on the Mesoamerican Reef.

In July 2006, the Voluntary Standards were unanimously approved, and then published in May 2007. To date, there is widespread support for standards implementation in the region. With continued education and training on sustainable tourism and reef conservation issues, region-wide implementation is gradually becoming a reality.

Long-Term Assessment

Voluntary standards implementation and assessment consists of a three-part program: 1) a self-evaluation consisting of checklist and narrative progress reports of operator's own performance against the standards, 2) peer-to-peer evaluation across tourism operators using identical checklists and narrative evaluation, and 3) an anonymous third-party "secret shoppers" program to gain additional verification data on operator performance. Data gathered from this testing phase identifies challenges for widespread adoption of the

standards, and informs the future direction of work in promoting sustainable marine recreation in each region.

Results

By early 2008, several businesses in Mexico and Belize have been assessed and are demonstrating implementation of standards and good practices. As proof of concept, three companies in Cozumel, Mexico, which collectively carry more than 75,000 tourists into the Cozumel National Marine Park each year, are rewriting company policy manuals to incorporate requirements from the marine recreation standards related to staff training, visitor management and briefings, and operation of vessels. CORAL acknowledges this as a significant indicator of early willingness to reassess the business-as-usual mentality in favor of reef (and ultimately, business) sustaining practices.

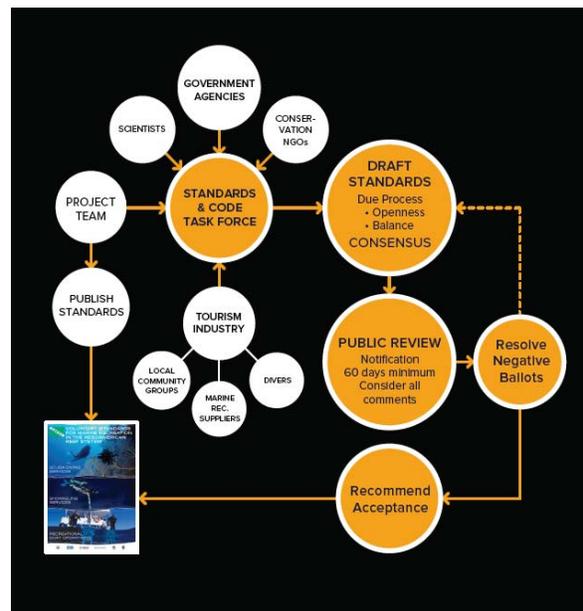


Figure 1: Successful process in Mesoamerica.

Case Study – Maui, Hawaii

Material and Methods

In 2006 CORAL was invited by the State of Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources, Division of Aquatic Resources to facilitate a voluntary standards development process on the Island of Maui. In contrast to marine tourism along the MAR, Maui's marine recreation landscape is highly politicized, heavily regulated, and relationships between resource managers and marine recreation operators are fractured. With the successful process experience in Mesoamerica, CORAL applied a similar approach to voluntary standards development on Maui.

Standards development on Maui temporarily stalled in early 2008 as a result of:

1. The State of Hawaii rewrote the Recreational Impacts to Reefs Local Action strategy to include language suggesting intent to regulate operator activity within marine protected areas based on the voluntary standards. This had a chilling effect on operator stakeholders who suddenly doubted whether the standards were truly voluntary.
2. The County of Maui threatened to close public beaches to all commercial recreational activity, raising concerns that a crackdown on recreational operators was imminent.
3. Following the sinking of a dive boat in Molokini Shoal Marine Life Conservation District, a \$500,000 fine was levied against the owner of the boat.

Results

The multi-stakeholder voluntary standards development process on Maui broke down by late Summer 2008. The recreational diving community disengaged from a process where interests outside of the dive operators weighed-in on their business operation. As a result, a small faction of resistant dive tourism operators took it upon themselves to craft their own set of recreational diving guidelines. Not technically standards, these guidelines lack broad stakeholder inclusion and discussion. Though the Maui process stalled, a new multi-stakeholder standards development process was launched along the Kailua-Kona coast of the Big Island of Hawaii and shows early signs of buy-in and collaboration.

Discussion

If developed through an industry-led, consensus-driven process and adopted as day-to-day practice by marine tourism operators, voluntary marine recreation standards are attainable, affordable, and offer a means to dramatically reduce tourism's ecological footprint on coral reef protected areas. Some very clear lessons learned were identified from the MAR and Hawaii initiatives:

- Cultivate industry ownership of the voluntary standards
- Promote transparency throughout the process
- Facilitate locally-based partnerships and coordination to implement standards and support conservation initiatives
- Be prepared for challenges and delays based on fear of regulation
- Utilize incentives and momentum to promote implementation



Figure 2: Resistance issues expected in Hawaii.

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