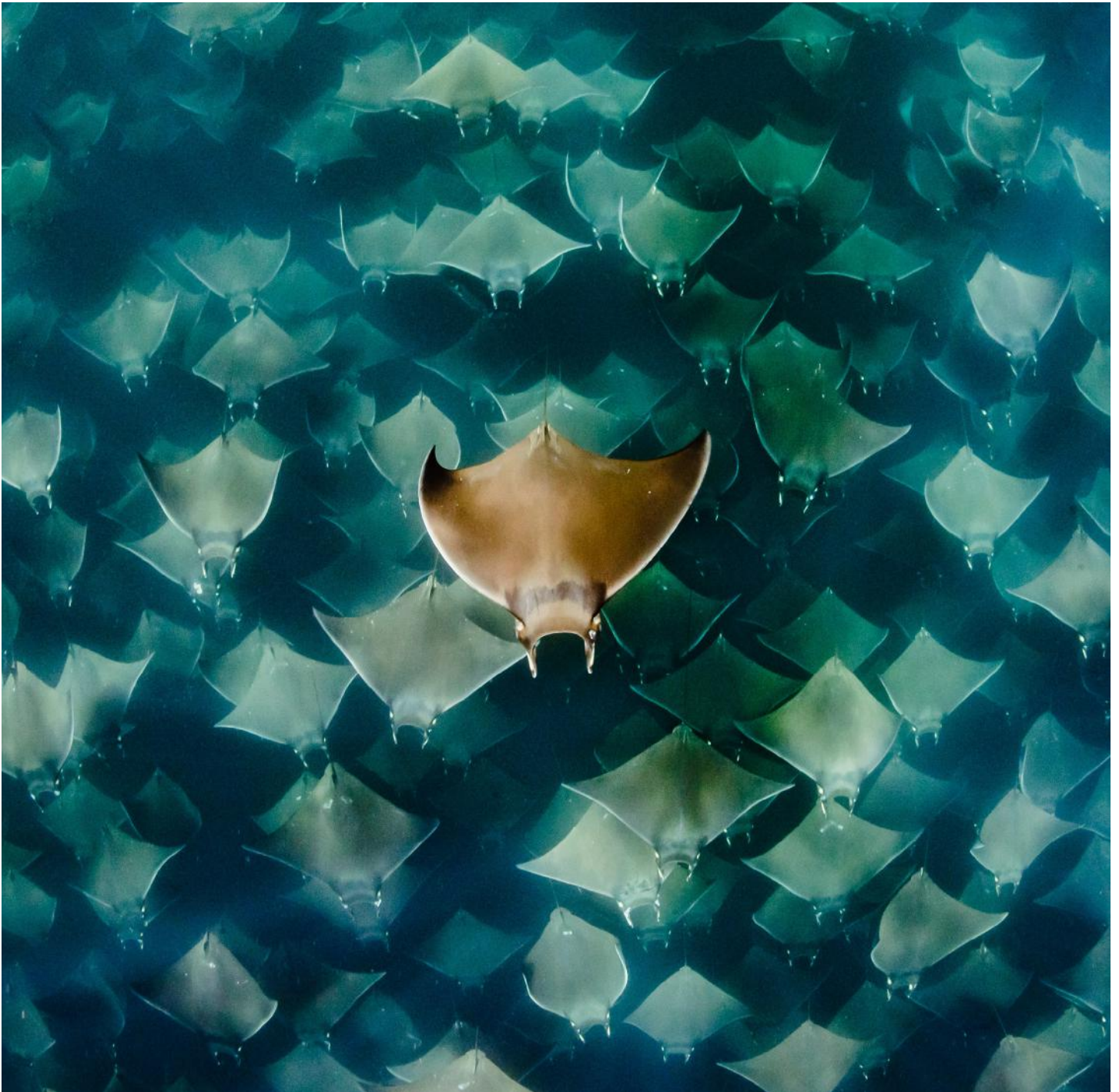


THE CYCLONE

ISSUE 5 - APR 2026

THE MANTA TRUST





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EDITOR'S LETTER

Welcome to Issue 5 of *Cyclone Magazine*. This issue is about connection — how a single sighting, a shared photograph, or a moment in the water can spark collaborations that grow into something far greater. From island communities to regional networks, we explore how collective effort is shaping the future of manta and devil ray conservation.

In *Species Spotlight*, we turn to the reef manta ray, highlighting new research from Seychelles that is helping us understand where and why these animals gather. Our feature stories span continents — from India, where conservation is being shaped alongside fishing communities, to West and Central Africa, where one remarkable mobula ray sighting led to the creation of a regional coalition, and to French Polynesia, where a decade of citizen science is transforming knowledge of manta populations.

Along the way, *Manta Moments* captures the beauty and power of encounters in the wild, while our Cyclone Member Spotlight celebrates the passion and personal stories that drive support for our work. Together, these stories show that meaningful conservation is built on collaboration, curiosity, and shared commitment.

Thank you for being part of the Cyclone. With your support, we continue to connect people, science, and action to better protect manta and devil rays around the world.

With warm regards,

Jasmine Corbett

Media & Communications Manager, Manta Trust



Species Spotlight

In each issue, we spotlight a different species of manta or devil ray, exploring fascinating facts and the latest research that reveals their unique behaviours, habitats, and conservation challenges. Each feature offers fresh insights into the remarkable diversity within this family of ocean giants. Through these in-depth explorations, we aim to enhance understanding, celebrate the extraordinary traits of these species, and highlight the crucial efforts dedicated to their protection. Join us as we uncover the wonders of manta and devil rays and the vital research that drives their conservation forward.



The reef manta ray (*Mobula alfredi*) is one of the largest and most iconic marine species, commonly found along tropical and subtropical coastal reefs of the Indian and West Pacific Oceans. Unlike their oceanic relatives, reef manta rays are typically encountered in shallower, more coastal waters around islands and continental shelf systems, making them a familiar sight for divers and snorkellers around the world.

Despite their popularity and accessibility, reef manta rays face growing pressures from targeted fisheries driven by demand for their gill plates, as well as the wider impacts of climate change, which may alter the distribution and abundance of the zooplankton prey they depend on.

[Recent research](#) from the remote island of D'Arros in Seychelles has revealed the site to host the largest known aggregation of reef manta rays in the region. Led by the Save Our Seas Foundation D'Arros Research Centre, the study shows that a consistent, year-round supply of plankton sustains reef mantas at the island and helps explain when and where the rays feed around D'Arros. These findings are already informing local conservation and management strategies aimed at better protecting surface-feeding mantas, while the Seychelles Manta Ray Programme, a collaboration between the Save Our Seas Foundation D'Arros Research Centre and the Manta Trust, and one of the Trust's long-standing affiliate projects, continues to expand understanding of how reef manta rays use these remote island habitats.

Reef Manta Ray

Mobula alfredi



Reshaping Mobula Ray Conservation in India

We're delighted to introduce this year's Cyclone Grant recipient: Mayuri Chopra from the India Mobulid Project. Made possible by Cyclone supporters, this annual grant funds one conservation project each year. This is the first of three articles following Mayuri's journey, sharing her background, work in India, and how Cyclone support is helping advance manta and devil ray research and conservation on the ground.

Growing up in a desert in Western India is where my curiosity for the ocean began. During my bachelor's degree, I spent much of my time by the sea and, in confronting the extensive environmental damage, developed a strong desire to make a difference. It was in Mumbai as a teenager, that I was inspired to become a marine biologist and conduct research for species conservation. I moved to the pristine West Australian coast of Perth to pursue a master's in marine biology at The University of Western Australia. After completing my degree, I gained diverse experience in grassroots conservation initiatives globally: community-based conservation in Mauritius; seal rescue and rehabilitation in Ireland; and a community-based marine waste management project in Kerala, India. These opportunities not only broadened my perspective but also strengthened my commitment to conservation, shaping my development as a future conservation leader.

After my masters, I wanted to contribute to the conservation of India's mega-biodiverse but largely

neglected marine wildlife. After several years working in the marine conservation sector in India, tackling issues in marine wildlife trade with WWF and TRAFFIC, I developed a strong interest in manta and devil rays. Given their biological vulnerabilities, I was struck by how little we knew about these species in Indian waters. Visiting fish landing centres during fieldwork and engaging with fishers further inspired me to focus on manta and devil rays. In 2022, I began my PhD at the University of Oxford on the '*Conservation of manta and devil rays through fisheries and policy assessment, and the identification of socio-economic linkages in India*', which officially became an affiliate with the Manta Trust as the India Mobulid Project in 2024.

As a trained ecologist, I am deeply motivated by conserving nature. However, my experience working with fishing communities in India has shaped my approach, leading me to pursue conservation that balance species protection with social equity. In particular, through my research, I seek to avoid placing disproportionate conservation burdens on socio-economically vulnerable coastal fishing communities.



© Mayuri Chopra

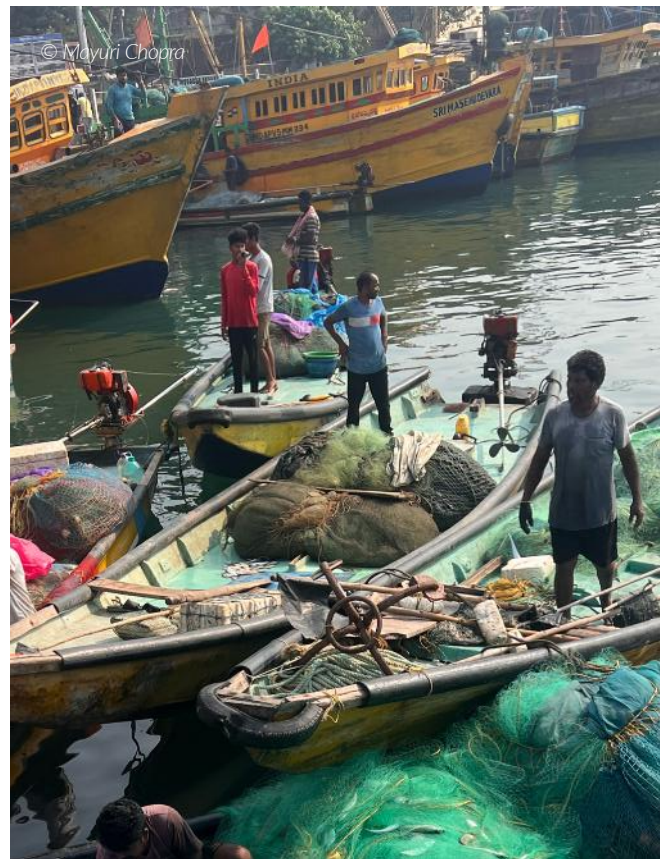




This perspective directly informs the India Mobulid Project's focus on understanding fishers' motivations and fishing drivers to support the development of more equitable conservation policies. The project focuses on assessing the mobulid fisheries, their ecological impact on manta and devil ray populations, and providing conservation recommendations for population recovery pathways. We use a diverse set of methodologies, including landing surveys, fisher and trader surveys, and ecological and economic modelling, to assess mobulid fisheries and the socio-economic dependencies of communities on these fisheries. Our work is supported by valued collaborators in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, Mohanraj T. and Tejaswi Abhiram Nagam, along with field assistants from fishing communities who are integral to its delivery.



Words by
Mayuri Chopra
India Mobulid
Project Founder



© Mayuri Chopra

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I SEEK TO AVOID PLACING
DISPROPORTIONATE
CONSERVATION BURDENS
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VULNERABLE COASTAL
FISHING COMMUNITIES.

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Monitoring Giants: A Decade of Citizen Science for Manta Rays in French Polynesia

Since 2015, an ambitious citizen science programme dedicated to monitoring manta rays has been conducted by the Polynesian Shark and Ray Observatory, in partnership with the Manta Trust and with the authorisation and support of the French Polynesian Department of the Environment. Over the past decade, this collaborative initiative has transformed how we understand manta ray populations across French Polynesia, thanks largely to the contributions of divers, photographers and ocean enthusiasts, as well as the invaluable support of Manta Trust members who conducted dedicated surveys, particularly in Bora Bora and the Marquesas.

At the heart of the programme lies a simple, effective and entirely non-invasive method: photo-identification. Much like a human fingerprint, every manta ray possesses a unique pattern of black spots on its belly. These markings appear at birth and remain unchanged throughout the animal's life. By photographing the ventral surface of a manta ray, researchers can identify individuals, track their movements over time, and gather crucial information about population size, site fidelity and longevity.

To date, nearly 10,000 photographs submitted by more than 440 contributors have enabled researchers to build one of the most comprehensive manta ray catalogues in the Pacific.

REEF MANTA RAYS (*MOBULA ALFREDI*) PASS OVER A CLEANING STATION IN FRENCH POLYNESIA

© French Polynesia Manta Project



© Simon Hilbourne



© Virginie Poly



© Maya Santangelo



REEF MANTA RAYS (*MOBULA ALFREDI*)
FEEDING IN FRENCH POLYNESIA

© Maya Santangelo



By 2025, the programme had recorded over 1,950 reef manta rays (*Mobula alfredi*) and 112 oceanic manta rays (*Mobula birostris*) in Polynesian waters. The programme also records other mobula rays in these waters, notably *Mobula tarapacana*, which is commonly observed in the Tuamotu archipelago and is considered a critically endangered species globally.

Among all archipelagos, the Marquesas Islands stand out as a global hotspot. The local manta population is estimated to be more than five times larger than those found elsewhere in French Polynesia. Remarkably, the Marquesas are also one of the few places in the world where both reef and oceanic manta rays can occasionally be observed gathering together, a phenomenon rarely documented elsewhere.

Long-term monitoring has also illustrated the extraordinary longevity of these animals. One remarkable example is Ariitea, a male reef manta ray first identified in Bora Bora in 2002 and still photographed in the lagoons of Bora Bora and Maupiti in 2026. This represents over 24 years of confirmed observations of a single individual. As he was already mature when first recorded, and as reef manta rays reach maturity at no earlier than seven years of age, Ariitea is now estimated to be at least 31 years old. While the exact lifespan of manta rays remains unknown, current estimates suggest they may live between 40 and 50 years, highlighting their slow life history and vulnerability to human pressures.

The collected data further demonstrates the impressive mobility of manta rays across the region. More than one hundred individuals have been recorded visiting multiple islands, including at least 38 manta rays regularly travelling between Maupiti and Bora Bora — two islands separated by deep ocean waters exceeding 3,000 metres. The current distance record belongs to an individual documented in both Bora Bora (Society archipelago) and Tikehau (Tuamotu archipelago), completing two round trips spanning over 400 kilometres. These movements underline the importance of protecting interconnected habitats across all archipelagos rather than isolated locations.

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BY COMBINING SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH WITH CITIZEN PARTICIPATION, THE PROGRAMME NOT ONLY ADVANCES KNOWLEDGE BUT ALSO STRENGTHENS CONSERVATION ACTION.

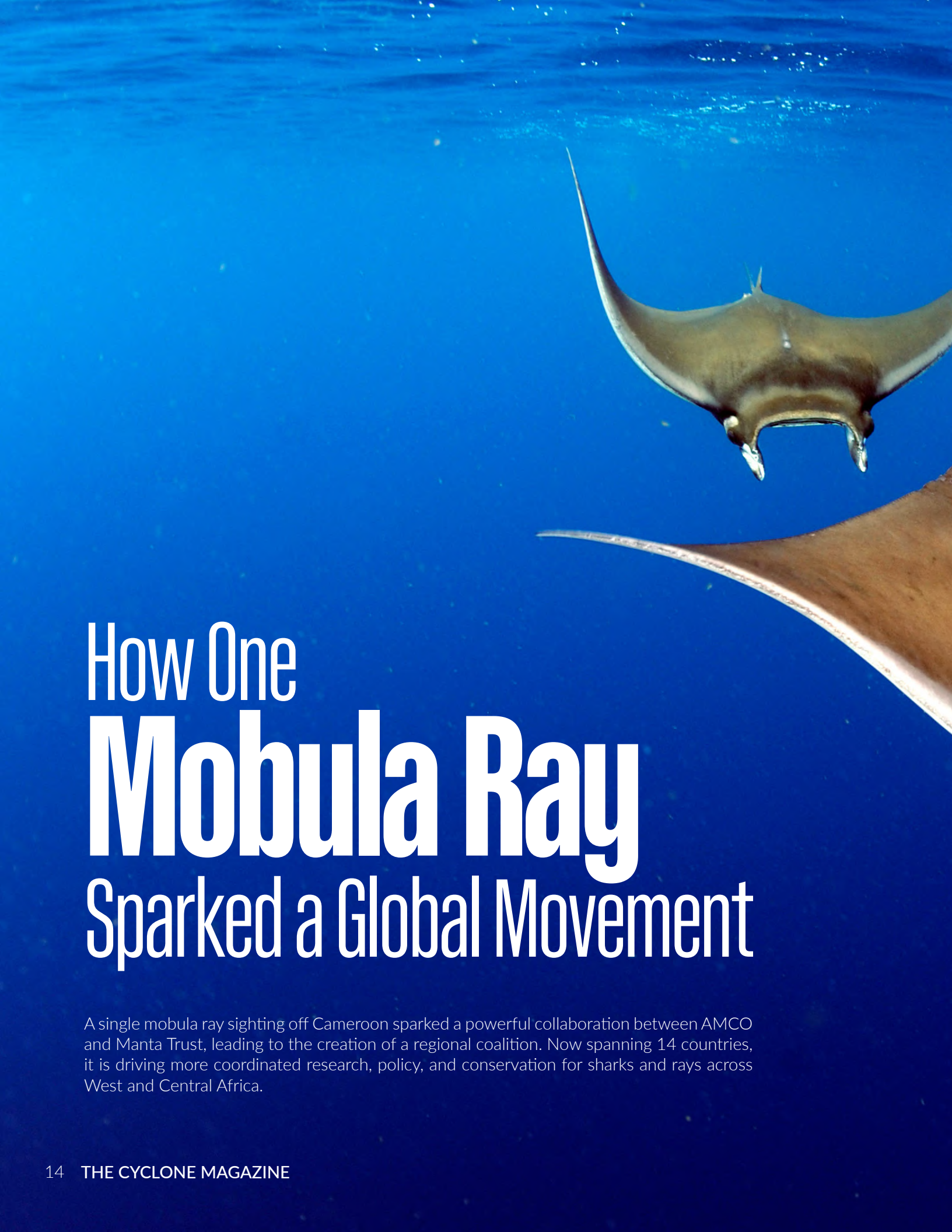
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Beyond population monitoring, photo-identification also allows researchers to document injuries and assess threats. Unfortunately, French Polynesia ranks among the regions with the highest levels of human-related injuries recorded on manta rays worldwide. In 2025 alone, 38 injuries were documented, including 27 linked to human activities such as fishing hooks and lines, boat propellers and net entanglements.

These findings are regularly shared with local authorities and have already contributed to the development of conservation initiatives aimed at reducing human impacts. By combining scientific research with citizen participation, the programme not only advances knowledge but also strengthens conservation action, ensuring that these iconic ocean giants continue to glide through Polynesian waters for generations to come.



Words by
Alice Carpentier
French Polynesia Manta Project
Article Support by: Virginie Poly and Maya Santangelo



How One Mobula Ray Sparked a Global Movement

A single mobula ray sighting off Cameroon sparked a powerful collaboration between AMCO and Manta Trust, leading to the creation of a regional coalition. Now spanning 14 countries, it is driving more coordinated research, policy, and conservation for sharks and rays across West and Central Africa.

ATLANTIC PYGMY DEVIL RAYS
(*MOBULA HYPOSTOMA*) IN THE
SEA OF CORTEZ, MEXICO

© Guy Stevens





Sometimes big movements start with a single image. For the West and Central Africa Elasmobranch Coalition, it all began with a rare mobula ray. In 2021, the African Marine Conservation Organisation (AMCO) shared an observation submitted by a fisherman from the coast of Cameroon through the Siren application (<https://sirenammco.org/>) – a platform created by AMCO to help fishing communities record marine species observed in landings and during fishing trips. Among the usual catch records was something extraordinary: a rare mobula ray identified as *Mobula hypostoma*. When the Manta Trust saw the post, they immediately reached out to AMCO. Soon after, AMCO and Manta Trust began working together to conduct genetic analyses to confirm the species identification.

In 2022, members of the Manta Trust team visited Cameroon to participate in AMCO's annual "Street Whale" event. During the visit, samples were collected from the specimen, and AMCO's team received training on improved data collection methods. Exploratory surveys were also conducted in key fish markets to better understand small-scale shark and ray fisheries and assess the scale of landings. The collaboration strengthened scientific exchange and built trust between local practitioners and international researchers, laying the groundwork for broader regional cooperation.

By 2023, the two organisations recognised that the challenges facing sharks and rays in the region – limited data, weak policy frameworks, and fragmented efforts – required something larger and more coordinated. They decided to create a regional network to connect researchers, NGOs, and practitioners working on sharks and rays across the Gulf of Guinea. The first regional workshop was hosted in Cameroon in June 2023, bringing together representatives from 12 countries and 20 regional experts. During this meeting, participants exchanged insights on ongoing work, identified key conservation challenges, and drafted the first regional strategy for sharks and rays. Shortly afterward, the draft strategy was presented during the CMS Marine Megafauna Week in Senegal in September 2023,

expanding the coalition's visibility and momentum across the region. During that meeting, government representatives requested that the network be expanded beyond the Gulf of Guinea to encompass the wider West and Central Africa region.

Today, the coalition connects 14 countries: Cameroon, Senegal, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Benin, Ghana, Angola, São Tomé & Príncipe, Gabon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, and Togo. Moreover, since 2025, the coalition has been formally associated with the IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group, reinforcing its scientific foundation and linking regional efforts with global shark and ray conservation expertise. This association enhances technical guidance, credibility, and opportunities for knowledge exchange with international specialists, while strengthening alignment with global conservation standards and best practices.



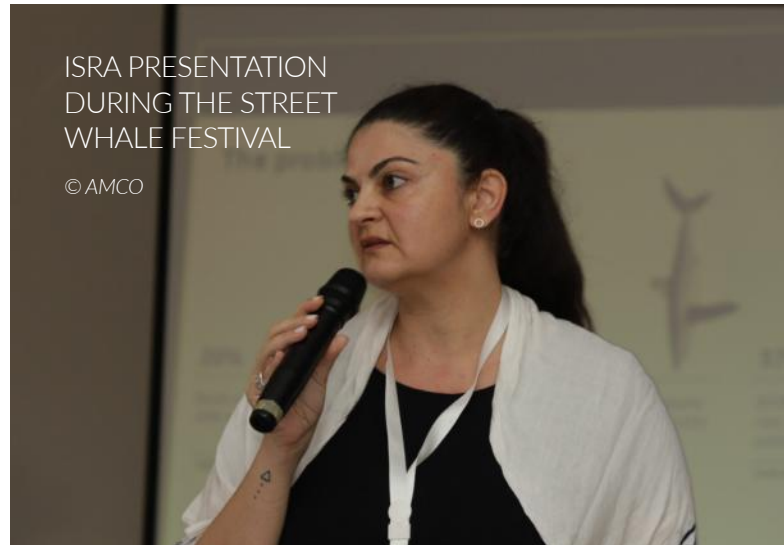
Over the last year, online interviews were conducted with coalition members to better understand national policies, fisheries management, trade dynamics, and conservation gaps related to sharks and rays. These interviews helped identify countries that are more advanced in policy development, as well as those where urgent support is needed. Based on these findings, the coalition submitted a proposal to the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation to strengthen policy efforts in five priority countries: Benin, Senegal, Cameroon, Angola, and Gabon. In 2026, the coalition received funding to implement its work over three years (2026–2028), both regionally across all 14 countries and with focused action in the five priority countries.

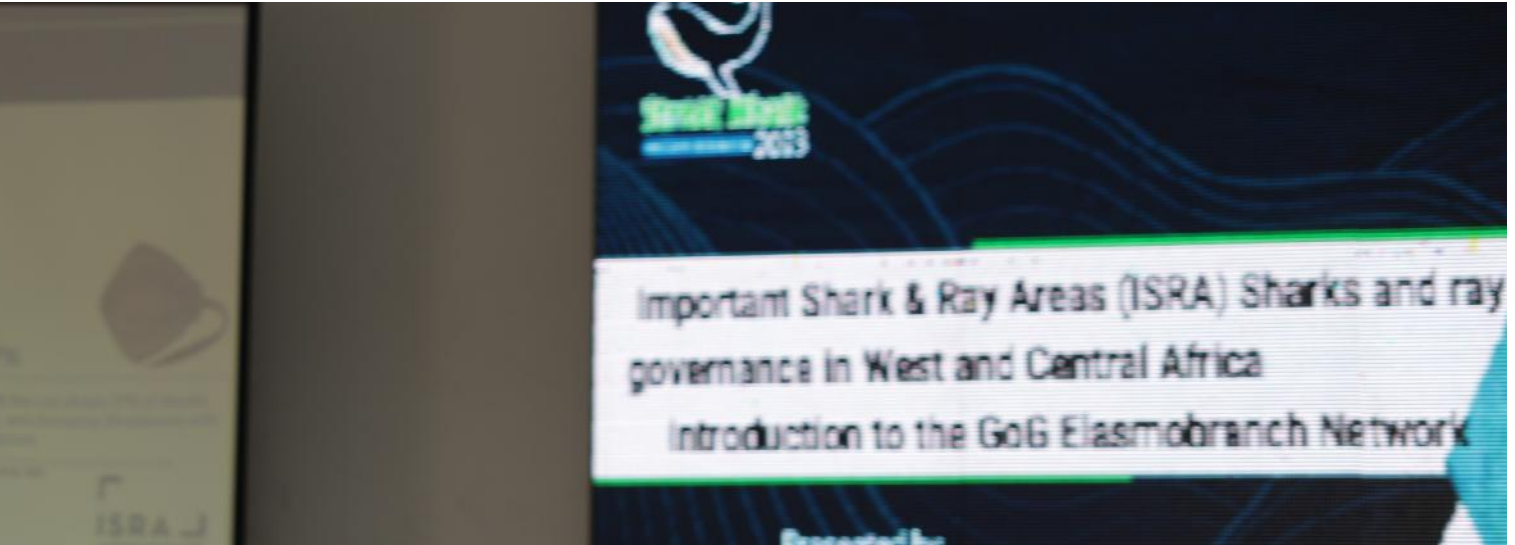
The next three years will focus on several priorities. First, strengthening data collection through fish market assessments, GPS catch-location data, identification of Important Shark and Ray Areas (ISRAs), and support for marine protected area planning. Second, improving policy implementation by organising CITES workshops in the five priority countries, supporting enforcement of updated CITES listings, and informing governments about international obligations and best practices. Third, enhancing collaboration and visibility by creating a coalition website to centralise research outputs and conservation efforts, hosting annual coalition meetings from 2026 to 2028, and providing training on data collection and analysis. Finally, building regional knowledge by developing the first regional atlas and guide to sharks and rays of West and Central Africa, and publishing two scientific papers: one on shark and ray policy and fisheries in the region, and another on shark and ray trade dynamics combining interview data, literature, official statistics, and industrial fisheries data.

For too long, West and Central Africa has been a region with limited data and relatively weak policy frameworks for sharks and rays. Efforts have often been isolated, with organisations working independently despite shared goals and shared challenges. The coalition aims to change that reality. By connecting people, strengthening science, supporting policy, and centralising knowledge, the West and Central Africa Elasmobranch Coalition is ensuring that conservation efforts are no longer fragmented but coordinated, informed, strategic, and impactful across the region. And it all started with a single mobula ray.



Words by
Ghofrane Labyedh
African Marine
Conservation Organisation





AN OCEANIC MANTA RAY
(MOBULA BIROSTRIS) IN
FUVAHMULAH, MALDIVES

© Jasmine Corbett



Manta Moments

In every issue, we showcase a hand-picked collection of our favourite manta encounters from around the world, brought to life through breathtaking photography by our dedicated team.

Each image tells a powerful story, capturing not only the beauty and grace of these gentle giants but also the urgency of protecting them. Through these evocative visuals, we hope to spark curiosity, inspire awe, and deepen understanding of the challenges manta and devil rays face. Let these extraordinary encounters renew your connection to the ocean and fuel a shared commitment to safeguarding manta rays for generations to come.





SICKLEFIN DEVIL RAYS (MOBULA
TARAPACANA) GATHER AT THE
AMBROSIO SEAMOUNT IN THE AZORES

© Danny Copeland



A REEF MANTA RAY (*MOBULA ALFREDI*)
CRUISES OVER A SHALLOW REEF IN
FRENCH POLYNESIA

© Gael Laguarrigue





Cyclone Member Spotlight

As much as we love sharing the behind-the-scenes of our work, we are equally inspired by YOU — the people who support it! Here, we meet Jan Verbrugghe, a passionate scuba diver whose unforgettable encounters with manta rays — from a magical honeymoon dive in Bali to volunteering through Salesforce — have shaped his deep commitment to supporting the Manta Trust and protecting the ocean life he loves.

Have you ever had the chance to see a manta ray in the wild? If so, can you share a memory that stands out as particularly special?

Yes, my first encounter happened a couple of years earlier when my wife and I were on our honeymoon. We had the opportunity to dive at a cleaning station in Bali, Indonesia. We were literally lying or floating for over an hour underneath tens of mantas as they were getting cleaned. It was magical. Seeing these amazing, large creatures float peacefully over our heads was wonderful.

What first inspired you to get involved with the Manta Trust? Was there a particular moment or experience that sparked your passion for manta conservation?

When I worked at Salesforce, there was a group of individuals who used the volunteering opportunities provided by the company to combine their passion for diving with oceanic conservation. I found out about that group by accident, but I was immediately intrigued and went with them on an excursion that was organised by the Manta Trust. That's where I first made a connection with them.

Supporting manta and devil ray conservation is a powerful commitment. What motivates you personally to stand behind this cause?

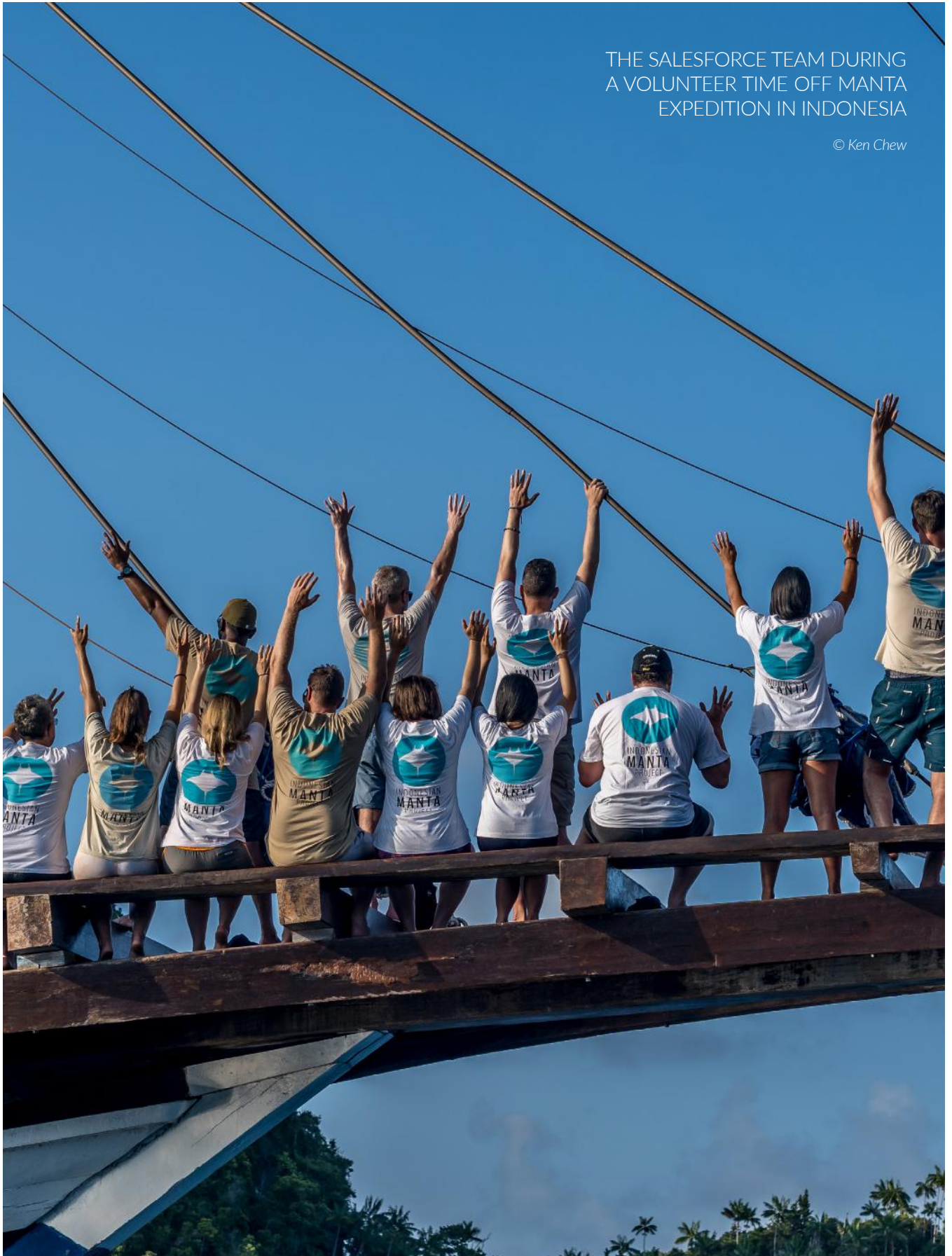
I'm a passionate scuba diver, and I have always learned that when you go scuba diving, you are a guest in a world that is not yours, and you have to respect it. It's really shocking to see that sharks, mantas, and other magnificent species are threatened by overfishing and environmental issues like plastic pollution. For me, it's a way to give back to the activity I love most—scuba diving—and help conserve the creatures I want to observe in the water.

If you could describe the work of the Manta Trust in one word, what would it be? Why does that word resonate with you?

I think that one word is passion. All the people I've met so far at the Manta Trust, and also the people I

THE SALESFORCE TEAM DURING
A VOLUNTEER TIME OFF MANTA
EXPEDITION IN INDONESIA

© Ken Chew



A MANTA
EXPEDITION IN
THE MALDIVES



JAN WITH A
WHALE SHARK

© Tahsin Alam



THE SALESFORCE TEAM
DOING A BEACH CLEAN
IN THE MALDIVES





met during their activities, all share one passion: a passion for these amazing creatures and a passion to learn more about them so we can better understand them and, therefore, better help them survive.

For someone who has never seen a manta before, how would you describe their presence in the water? What makes them unique in your eyes?

They are just magnificent. They seem to float effortlessly. They have this dark top side and a white underbelly that is just so beautiful. They move gracefully, and it's just wonderful to see them. It's impressive, yet very calming and relaxing to watch.

As a supporter of the Manta Trust's mission, what are your hopes for the future of manta and devil rays?

Hopefully, one day we will be able to say that manta and devil rays are protected and thriving again, and that more and more people get the opportunity to meet them in their own environment—again, as visitors in their world.

Do you have a favourite quote or saying about the ocean that inspires you?

I would say it's that the ocean is the cradle of the world. I think life started there, and I believe it's therefore important for us to respect that.

If you could be any sea creature for a day, what would you choose and why?

A manta ray would be the obvious choice. However, I would choose a sea turtle. Like mantas, sea turtles are also threatened, but they have the same very calming, relaxing way of cruising through the oceans. So, a manta ray is option one, but a sea turtle would certainly be a very close number two.

Finally, what message would you share with others who are thinking about supporting the conservation of manta and devil rays?

Just do it. Conserving manta and devil rays focuses on a particular species, but in doing so, you also send a message to everyone that it's all about protecting our oceans and, in a wider context, protecting our environment. And by the way, my sons really love manta rays, so it makes me very popular with them as well.

Jan Verbrugghe
Cyclone Member



Member



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Benefits



Enjoy Your Exclusive Cyclone Member Perks!
As a valued member of The Cyclone, you're already making a huge difference for manta rays—and we want to thank you with some exclusive perks you're now entitled to!

You can enjoy a Buy One, Get One Free offer on our Maldives Manta Adoption Packs. Adopt a manta for yourself and receive a second Digital Adoption Pack free (worth £30)—a perfect gift for a friend or loved one! Each pack includes a personalised adoption certificate, fascinating facts about your manta, and updates on their latest sightings.

You also receive an exclusive 10% discount on everything in the Manta Trust Clothing Store, including our eco-friendly t-shirts, tote bags, and more. Every purchase helps support our vital conservation work and spreads the word about protecting manta rays.

Thank you for being such an important part of The Cyclone. Together, we're creating a brighter future for manta rays and their ocean home!



APPLY CODE **CYCLONEB1G1**
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mantatrust.org/adopt-a-manta

© Simon Hilbourne



Thank you for your generous support! Your Cyclone Membership is helping us protect manta rays and preserve marine habitats. Every contribution fuels research, conservation, and education around the world. Together, we're making a difference for our oceans and future generations. Thank you for standing with us!

