

Scuba Diving Tourism is being underestimated

Weak links between divers and local communities, governance issues and lack of support from authorities and the scientific community – these emerged during the Green Bubbles project that shed light on problems preventing scuba diving tourism systems from functioning as they should.

Scuba diving tourism encourages conservation and supports local communities. It also generates billions worldwide and contributes heavily towards economies – yet its potential as a sustainable form of tourism is not being recognised enough.

As a result, scuba diving tourism systems rarely function the way they should – and the scuba diving industry, and its stakeholders, are suffering the consequences.

The EU-funded project [Green Bubbles](#) set out to address this issue by shedding light on what is affecting the healthy functioning of SCUBA Ecosystem. The goal of the project was to understand the problem and propose solutions to stimulate the growth of the scuba diving tourism industry. Understanding its interactions with environmental, social, and economic factors is important in the context of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), where dynamics between role players are complex.

The project set out to explore two case studies from two completely different realities: the Portofino MPA in Italy and the Ponta do Ouro MPA in the developing country of Mozambique.

Local dive operators from both countries were invited to share their views on scuba diving tourism industry during focus groups and interviews. Interestingly the replies, obtained from different corners of the globe, showed strong commonalities:

Governance issues

Operators in Italy and Mozambique felt that governance issues are hampering the functioning of the scuba diving tourism industry. They wished for a better relationship with MPA managers and local authorities – a relationship based on sound collaboration and communication. As a possible solution they spoke about more transparency of communications with the relevant authorities and suggested being involved in the planning and management of MPAs.

Disconnected from locals

Another common observation was that members of resident communities are disconnected from the local scuba diving tourism industry and this is resulting in a weak link between the two. More needs to be done to better educate visitors and resident communities on the role and benefits of the scuba diving industry in their country. After all, the industry has the potential to stimulate economic growth and educate the public on environmental issues, amongst other things.

Lack of protection within MPAs

The dive operators also felt that other industries, like fishing, are threatening the health of the marine

environment and the survival of local scuba diving tourism – despite the fact that MPAs are often perceived as protected from human interference. This, they suggested, could be addressed by improving zoning and upping the patrol and environmental protection in these areas.

Scientific support

Even though the operators recognised that scientific progress is a great asset to their industry, they felt that the ties between the scientific community and the scuba diving industry were weak. To address this they recommended better involvement by the scientific community. Clearly, the project shows that the industry has challenges to face in reaching the sustainability goals set for it. This will only be possible with the support of the relevant stakeholders.

It is critical to ensure that the scuba diving industry is assisted in its journey of resilience to change, particularly since it possesses enormous potential for education, protection, exploration, conservation, development, and economic emancipation. Will this potential remain short-lived with never-ending challenges being faced by the scuba diving industry? Let's work together to ensure this does not happen.

About the Author:

Dr. Serena Lucrezi PhD works as a research fellow for TREES (Tourism Research in Economic Environs and Society), North-West University, South Africa. She is a sandy beach ecologist, but she has a great passion for research in scuba diving, particularly the human dimensions of the sport including the environmental perceptions of scuba divers and their views on issues from conservation to governance and proper underwater conduct. She has authored three papers on scuba diving, published in scientific journals. She has also authored a few articles published in blogs and online magazines. Last but not least, she is a novel yet very keen scuba diver and Sidemounter.

[Scuba diving tourism systems and sustainability: Perceptions by the scuba diving industry in two Marine Protected Areas](#) – Full publication, [Tourism Management](#), Volume 59, April 2017, Pages 385–403