

Marine Conservation Society, Seychelles (MCSS)

2012 Whale Shark Monitoring Programme Internships

The Marine Conservation Society, Seychelles (MCSS) is a local Non-Governmental Organisation that was registered in 1997 and incorporates the Shark Research Institute, Seychelles (SRIS). The MCSS was formed by a group of local marine experts to meet the lack of capacity in Seychelles and to address matters of marine biodiversity conservation and sustainable use. MCSS remains to this day, the only Seychelles based Non-Governmental Organisation dedicated exclusively to the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity.

In 2000, the MCSS successfully obtained funding from the Global Environment Facility for a three year project focused primarily on the management of coral reefs, whale sharks and marine turtles following the severe bleaching event of 1998.

The MCSS/SRIS has pioneered work in Seychelles in a number of highly successful projects including monitoring the whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*), management of the Crown-of-thorns-starfish (*Acanthaster planci*), the installation and maintenance of environmentally friendly moorings systems, a strategic approach to marine turtle management, the development of marine eco-tourism activities and the sustainable use of marine biodiversity in general.

MCSS bases its work on a policy of open engagement of actors in the domain of marine conservation, sustainable use and development; and works closely with local partners such as the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, the Seychelles Fishing Authority (SFA), the National Parks Authority (NPA) and the Seychelles Centre for Marine Research and Technology (SCMRT) without compromising its role as an independent NGO.

The MCSS is active on national committees such as the Steering Committee for the Environmental Management Plan and contributes to Seychelles' international undertakings in a number of ways including the fulfilment of reporting obligations and sending representatives on national delegations to international meetings.

The MCSS have been monitoring whale sharks around Seychelles since the pilot project in November 1996. The programme has grown steadily both in terms of scope and size and is now one of the most comprehensive whale shark research programmes globally. The programme is led by whale shark researcher Dr. David Rowat in conjunction with advisors Dr. Rupert Ormond and Dr. Mauvis Gore. It receives financial support for specific project components from the Save Our Seas Foundation, which enables a wide range of activities to be implemented.

From its inception in 1996, the programme has relied upon the enthusiasm and support of the public in assisting with the gathering of data and this 'citizen science' has been the primary building block on which the programme is based. However, in order to maximise the value of the data collected, the monitoring systems require strict standardisation and while the public is directly involved in the in-water encounter activities, the majority of the data are collected by intern volunteers (sometimes called eco-volunteers) who are trained in the necessary data capture activities and data entry to ensure compliance with standards.

In view of the large amount of data that is now being captured a structured approach has become necessary with respect to volunteers participation; also it is very time consuming to train new applicants part way through the season. As such, the programme will be run with 6 internships being offered on a full-season basis.

Marine Conservation Society, Seychelles (MCSS)

The internship programme will last for 10 weeks from 20th August to 31st October 2012. The first week will be an orientation and training week, week two will hopefully be getting some practice whale shark trips and helping the pilots set up the micro-light aircraft, and as of week three the monitoring activities proper will be implemented.

The six interns will work as two teams, one for each monitoring boat, and each team will be supervised by a team leader who in turn will work under the project leader. The two team leaders have already been selected from the monitoring team volunteers from last year and both have considerable monitoring and volunteer organisational experience. Duty days will be on a roster allowing one full day off every week. The interns will be accommodated at the MCSS premises on the coast at Glacis, NW Mahe on a self-catering basis. The property has two bedrooms set out dormitory-style for a maximum of four persons each and each bedroom has an en-suite bathroom facility enabling male - female separation. There is a large living-room and kitchen for communal use with washing machine and all usual amenities. There is also a large veranda connecting the living accommodation to the MCSS office. Wireless internet service is available throughout the premises.

The premises are on the local bus route with bus stops within 100m, there is a general store about 500m down the road and a public access beach 50 m from the site although we do have direct access to the sea from the site but this is a rocky entry.

The interns' training and duties will cover the full range of activities associated with the MCSS whale shark monitoring programme including:

- The Seychelles whale shark programme:- findings, achievements, why it exists
- Basic whale shark information and biology
- Whale shark data collection:- filling out forms, writing up data, the systems and spreadsheets
- Photo identification:- sorting and filing images, pre-process preparation, matching software
- Snorkel training and water skills development for whale shark activities (subject to qualifications)
- Communications training:- between micro-light and boat and between boats
- Boat operations:- logistics, protocols and safety
- Micro-light aerial survey support and data handling, software use
- Environmental monitoring equipment use, data capture and handling
- Study area orientation and geography

This internship programme is aimed at providing a competent team who will be able to develop the maximum amount of data from the Seychelles monitoring programme which in turn will be fed into the cooperative regional and global conservation initiatives that this programme supports.

The basic monitoring work is done by the interns and team leaders taking members of the public out to see whale sharks and swim with them, subject to the Seychelles Whale Shark Encounter Code. This code allows a maximum of 8 persons in the water at any one time, i.e. one of the research team and seven members of the public. This research team member is called the 'Spotter' and it is their job to stay on the shark and indicate its location for the other snorkellers to find it. However, they also have two other vital duties: first and foremost they have to ensure the safety of the people in the water, and secondly they have to capture the necessary images for photo-identity matching and size and sex the shark. As such, this is a demanding job and generally those allocated this role have Divemaster or similar

Marine Conservation Society, Seychelles (MCSS)

training so that they are able to resolve any safety situations if needed. Consequently, not all interns will get to be the spotter, although all interns will get in the water with whale sharks on a fairly regular basis. If an intern does not have a Divemaster or supervisory life-saving qualification they will still get to 'Spot' and take photo IDs (subject to them having shown appropriate aptitude during training) but always under the supervision of one of the qualified team leaders.

The other regular roles in the monitoring programme are equally as important; communications with the pilots and data recording is an essential part of the activities, and these are prime functions of the interns. Please do not expect to be in the water leading whale shark encounters every day as this is not likely to be the case; we will however, endeavour to get you in the water as often as possible. The only specific requirements for all applicants are that they must be able to swim well and be prepared to work hard. All applications must be made on the internship application form where applicants should provide as much supportive information about themselves as possible.

The costs of the internship programme, inclusive of shared accommodation and training is Euro 2350 per person for the ten weeks. These costs do include utilities (power and water) but exclude food costs, private local travel and international travel to and from Seychelles, all of which are the intern's responsibility.

MCSS and the various volunteers that have assisted us, have compiled a document of tips for prospective volunteers; it is not an exhaustive guide but will assist you in both making the decision to come and what to bring and what to budget while you are here.

I hope that this information is of use to you and if I can be of further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.

Dr. David Rowat, Project Leader.

Prepared November 2011