

OCEAN GEOGRAPHIC

ISSUE 76:04/2026

THE THIRD POLE

Where the **FROZEN HEART OF ASIA** Begins to Fail

ISSN 1834-9102



9 771834 910001 07

OGSociety.org
EST. 2007

A group of manta rays swimming in clear blue water. The rays are seen from above, showing their dark, flat bodies and white undersides. They are scattered across the frame, with some in the foreground and others in the background. The water is a deep, clear blue, and the lighting is bright, highlighting the texture of the rays' skin and the details of their gills.

Maldives: A Profusion of Biodiversity

by **Mark B. Hatter**



A phalanx of reef manta rays gather at Hanifaru Bay on Baa Atoll when conditions are right to cartwheel and train in the plankton rich shallows as they feed.



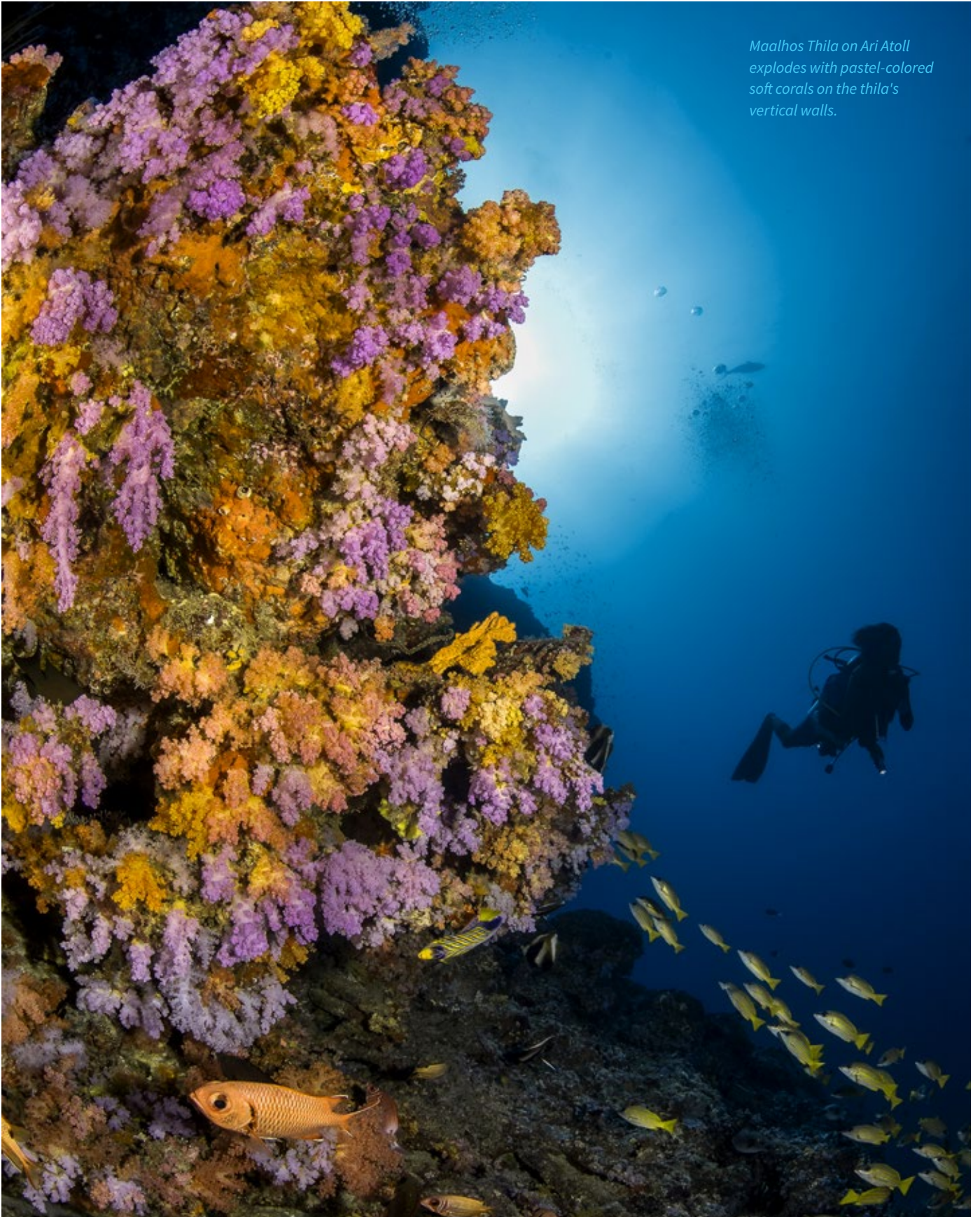
Inside Fesdhoo Lagoon on Ari Atoll, special night dives are planned around a line of torches in the sand which draws plankton and, in turn, reef mantas for an "in your face" experience.

After nearly 40 hours of travel across ten time zones, the prospect of descending into the crystalline waters of Dhigali Haa Thila in Baa Atoll feels less like recreation and more like medicine. Three years have passed since my last visit to the Maldives—three years in which I have quietly missed the sensation of current against my skin, the improbable clarity of the water, and the almost overwhelming profusion of life that defines these reefs.

Standing at the stern of *Duke of York's* dhoni, the dive tender rocking gently beneath a full moon, I noticed something remarkable: there are only six of us booked for the next seven days. The boat feels vast. In truth, it felt like a privilege.

I was the last to giant-stride into the water, kicking hard to follow the stream of bubbles descending ahead. We make a negative entry—no lingering at the surface—as spring tides driven by the full moon have generated powerful currents across the atoll. At 20 metres, I find my group, settle into a cleft between two boulders, and conduct a quick check.

The reef top is a magnificent chaos. A shifting cloud of silversides pulses and folds in the current like a living organism, ricocheting off the reef's jagged contours. Animated anemones stream in the flow like banners in a gale. Above them, dense shoals of golden anthias hold position, heads into the current, vibrating with effort.



Maalhos Thila on Ari Atoll explodes with pastel-colored soft corals on the thila's vertical walls.

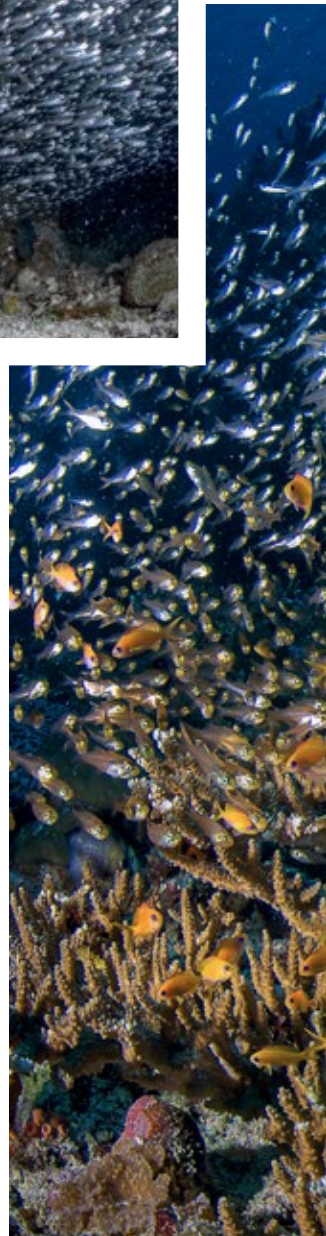


A batfish enjoys not one but two cleaner wrasses while surrounded by a profusion of tiny silversides at Dhigali Haa Thila on Baa Atoll.

For a moment, I am suspended in that rare, delicious paralysis—the impossibility of choosing where to look. A flash from below breaks the spell. It hit me in an instant, "Start deep, shoot your way up."

Dropping beneath the silverside curtain, I reached the sand where a large batfish hovers at a wrasse cleaning station, utterly indifferent to the surrounding frenzy. I raise my camera.

Oh, how I have missed the Maldives.



At Fish Head Thila, golden-colored anthias swarm with shoals of silversides among the stoney coral formations on Ari Atoll.





SEACAM-Nikon camera system in hand, swimmer Michael Aw descends into a line of “training” reef mantas to capture his images at Hanifaru Bay on Baa Atoll.

It scarcely matters which atoll you explore, or whether you arrive by liveaboard or island resort—the Maldives delivers a remarkably consistent standard of underwater theatre. Colour, current, visibility, and an extraordinary abundance of reef fish define these coral jewels of the Indian Ocean. From anthias and silversides to snappers, fusiliers, glassfish, and sweetlips, every thila (the local term for a submerged pinnacle), seems to host its own kinetic congregation. Even reef manta rays (*Mobula alfredi*) and the ubiquitous Maldivian anemonefish gather at predictable feeding and cleaning sites across the atolls.

One of the most spectacular aggregations occurs at Hanifaru Bay in Baa Atoll, a designated UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The morning after our first dive, we found ourselves drifting in the shallow basin, clad in three-millimetre suits, breathing through snorkels in anticipation. Driven by monsoon currents, the bay funnels dense concentrations of zooplankton into its natural amphitheatre. Reef mantas respond in numbers that can exceed 100 individuals during peak season, performing coordinated chain-feeding and cyclonic feeding behaviours—some of the most extraordinary feeding displays in the marine world.

Shark Rays make common appearances at Neru Mathi on Male Atoll.

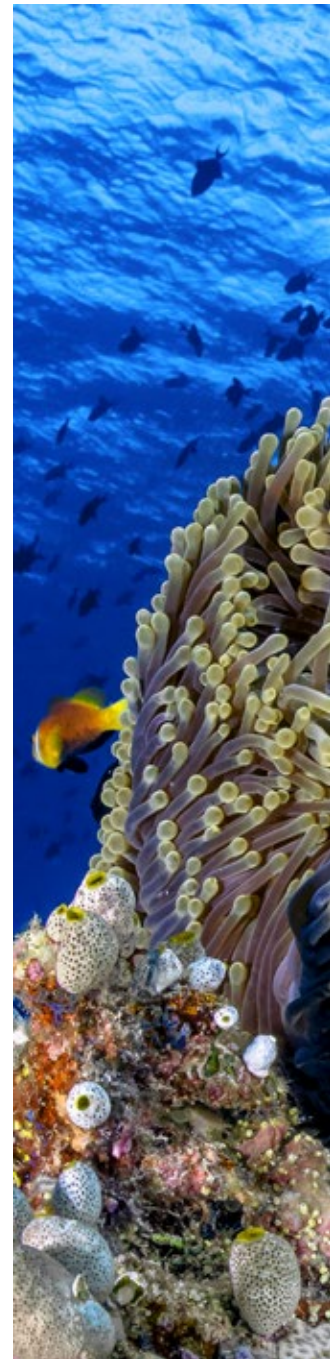




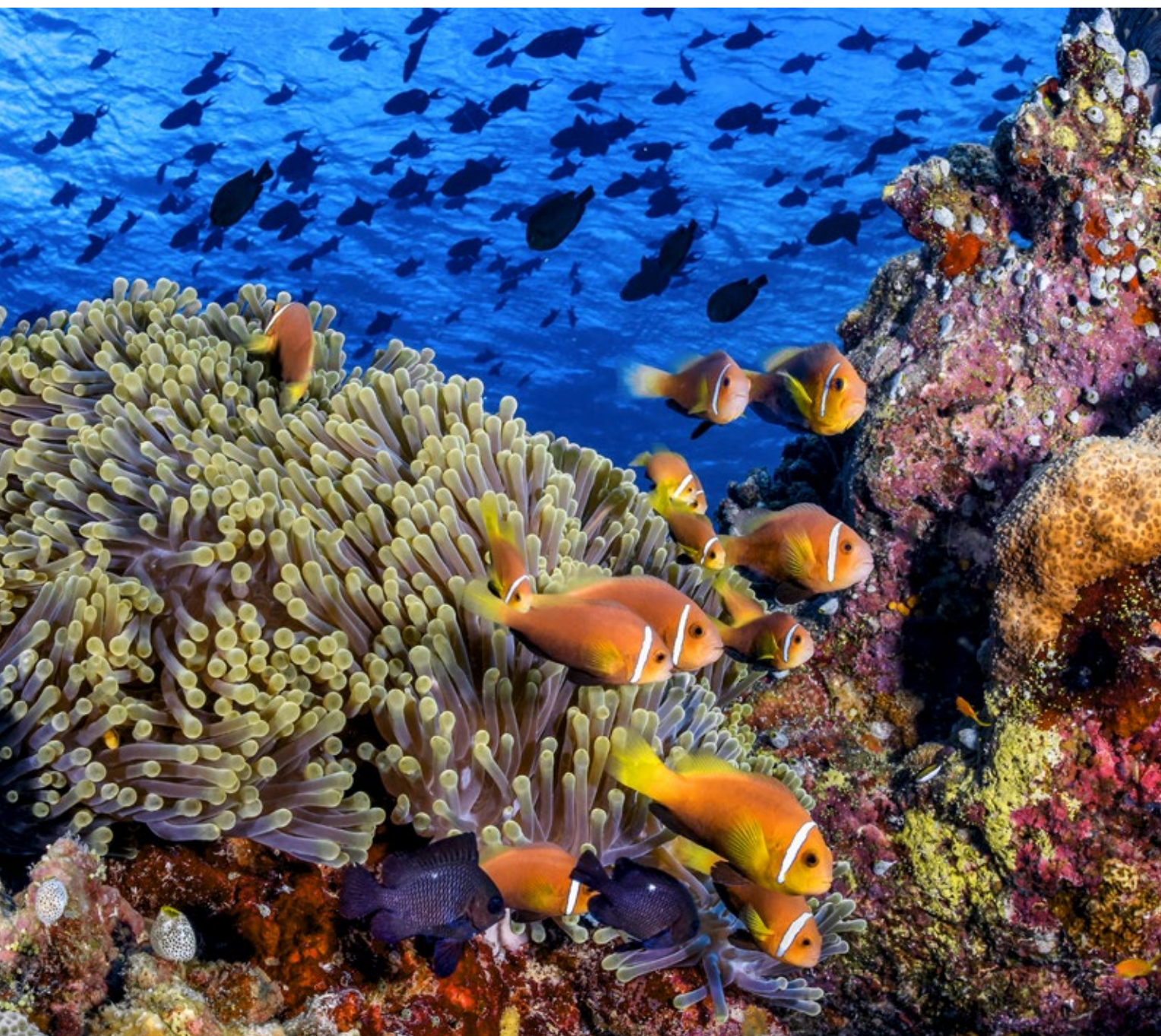
Shoals of silversides are ubiquitous in the Maldives. At Maaya Thila on Ari Atoll they take cover among the branches of black coral for protection against possible ambush predators.

For 30 minutes, I alternated between the surface and brief breath-hold descents, pushing down to five metres, equalising, shooting, returning—again and again—caught between oxygen debt and exhilaration, trying to do justice to a spectacle that resists containment. Reef mantas are a defining presence throughout the archipelago. At cleaning stations such as Lankan Manta Point in North Malé Atoll, we hovered at respectful distances as mantas circled overhead, presenting their ventral surfaces to cleaner wrasse. And if daylight encounters were not enough, a night dive at Fesdhoo Lagoon delivered something almost surreal: mantas gliding through columns of light, feeding on plankton drawn to torches, their vast wingspans cutting through darkness like apparitions.

The Maldives Anemonefish only hosts in Magnificent Anemones and often form social groups of a dozen or more fish, like this family in Madivau Channel on Rasdhoo Atoll.



Beyond these headline encounters, the Maldives rewards the observant photographer at every scale. At Maalhos Thila in Ari Atoll, vertical walls are carved with fissures and overhangs, draped in orange, red, and purple soft corals. Schools of bigeye and blue-striped snapper assemble against these vivid backdrops in compositions that feel almost deliberate. Fesdhoo Thila offers reef tops carpeted with magnificent anemones nestled among stony coral frameworks. Maya Thila presents sweeping table corals and dense schools of glassfish, while Bodu Gaa shelters extensive stands of staghorn coral alive with territorial damselfish.





Banana Reef on Male Atoll is famous for its enormous school of shape-shifting Blue-striped Snapper.



Normally a nocturnal hunter, this lionfish is looking for a snack of silversides in broad daylight on Dharavandhoo Thila at Baa Atoll.

Then there is Banana Reef in North Malé Atoll—a site I have returned to repeatedly and would do so again without hesitation. A vast school of blue-striped snapper patrols the reef wall as a unified entity, its elongated formation tracing the curvature of the reef. Whether this shape inspired the reef's name remains uncertain, but the resemblance is compelling.

For those willing to slow down, the macro world is equally rewarding. Late in the trip, I switched to a 60mm lens and abandoned wide-angle temptation. On rubble slopes and reef edges, I found gobies, blennies, cleaning symbioses, and nesting anemonefish defending their hosts with theatrical intensity. The Maldives is not only about spectacle—it is about detail, patience, and discovery.



The Maldives, as writer and architect Mariyam Isha Azeez observed, is not defined by its resorts or even its capital, Malé. It is defined by its islands and the communities whose lives are inseparable from the surrounding ocean. This makes the threats facing the nation not only environmental, but existential. The Maldives sits at an average elevation of just over one metre above sea level, making it one of the most vulnerable nations to climate change. Coral bleaching events in 1998 and 2016, driven by global marine heatwaves associated with strong El Niño events, caused widespread coral mortality across the archipelago and the broader Indian Ocean. Rising sea temperatures, ocean acidification, and increasing frequency of thermal stress events continue to challenge reef resilience. Meanwhile, plastic pollution and coastal development add localised pressures, though it is worth noting that the Maldives has also made significant progress in marine protection and sustainable tourism practices.

In 2009, then-President Mohamed Nasheed held an underwater cabinet meeting—a powerful visual statement to highlight the urgency of climate change. More recently, at international climate

forums including COP28, Maldivian leaders have continued to stress a stark reality: for low-lying island nations, limiting global warming is not a policy debate but a matter of survival.

Fish Head Thila on Ari Atoll is the quintessential example of Maldivian biodiversity, it explodes with a profusion of life.

Encouragingly, solutions are emerging. The Mars Assisted Reef Restoration System (MARRS), developed by Mars Sustainable Solutions, has shown promising results in reef rehabilitation. Using steel “reef stars” to stabilise coral rubble and support coral fragment growth, the system has demonstrated significant increases in coral cover and fish biomass in Indonesia, and is now being applied in parts of the Maldives through partnerships with resorts and NGOs.

Hope, here, is not passive. It is engineered, cultivated, and fought for. As Dr Sylvia Earle has long reminded us: “*The rest of the living world can get along without us, but we can’t get along without them.*”

In the Maldives, that truth is not philosophical. It is immediate. It is visible. It is the water surrounding every island.