

## Striving for a Blue Destination – Finding Common Ground

## Luchando por un Destino Azul: Encontrar un Terreno Común

## Vise une Destination Bleue – Trouver un Terrain d’Entente

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### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

#### Introduction

Bonaire is a small, Dutch Caribbean island north of Venezuela whose economy is largely based on coral reef tourism. For 40 years, the Bonaire National Marine Park (BNMP) has actively managed its coral reefs through coral reef conservation actions and regulations, community outreach and long-term partnerships with government agencies, private companies and local stakeholders. As our island works towards defining and achieving the status of a Blue Destination, partnerships and close communications, especially between STINAPA and the local government, are necessary to ensure sustainable development.

#### Public-Private Partnerships

The BNMP has a strong partnership with the dive industry as they are its eyes and ears on the water and, until recently, they were responsible for collecting the nature fees that supported the running of the park. In 1978 a series of mooring buoys was installed and anchoring was prohibited in the BNMP, which surrounds the entire island from the high tide line to a depth of 60 m. Since 1992, annual dive tags and, more recently, annual nature fees for all visitors to the BNMP and the Washington Slagbaai National Park, also managed by STINAPA Bonaire, have funded the day to day operations of the parks. This year, tag sales went online to lessen the workload and to streamline sales. STINAPA maintains the dive moorings, enforces marine park regulations, assists with events on the water and STINAPA rangers are often the first responders to marine emergencies including stranded vessels, grounded vessels, lost divers, oil spills, storms, etc.

Strengthening this partnership are several initiatives that have evolved in which coral reef conservation activities are only permitted via the dive industry, such as lionfish hunting and coral restoration specialties. Bonaire’s lionfish control program has been active since lionfish invaded Bonaire’s waters in 2009. Densities of lionfish have remained low (de Leon et al. 2013, P. Bertuol, STINAPA Bonaire, unpublished data) as a result of the dedication of local hunters combined with a high demand for lionfish meat by local restaurants (currently selling for \$50/kg filet). In Bonaire, spearfishing is illegal, but there is a special provision that allows for the use of ELF (Eliminate LionFish) tools solely for targeted lionfish hunting. ELFs are registered by the BNMP and only residents are allowed to own one. To protect local interests and generate income for the dive centers, tourists must hire a local guide if they want to hunt lionfish.

Coral restoration activities, permitted by the government and supervised by STINAPA, also bring revenue to the dive industry via restoration certifications and guided dives. STINAPA works closely with Reef Renewal Bonaire when deciding on sites and protocols for harvesting initial coral nubbins or fragments, the location and installation of nurseries and outplant sites, and with recent fertilization programs. Many dive centers work with Reef Renewal Bonaire resulting in over 25,000 outplanted *Acropora* corals in the past four years. Survivorship is high and all but one of the outplant sites are teeming with corals and associated fish species.

In a joint effort to salvage thousands of sponges during a pier renovation project at one of Bonaire’s most popular dive sites, Salt Pier, STINAPA partnered with Cargill and Dive Friends Bonaire to develop volunteer and guided dive programs to successfully transplant sponges that would have perished during the renovation. Sponges were transplanted from sections of corroded pillars that needed to be reinforced to safe sections of pillars. Fishing line was used to re-attach the sponges and, when secured firmly, reattachment was successful within two months and the line could be removed. Although the transplantation was spearheaded by dedicated STINAPA volunteers, the majority of the line removal was accomplished by guided dives led by Dive Friends Bonaire.

Furthermore, STINAPA is partnering with the dive industry to develop guided citizen science dives to receive data on coral disease and bleaching prevalence. These dives are being designed to get divers involved in coral reef conservation and to give managers an indication on the severity of disease and/or bleaching at different sites around the island so that further scientific studies may be undertaken when needed.

STINAPA also partners with fishermen in its work towards coral reef conservation. During several rounds of shark research in 2017 and 2018 using Baited Remote Underwater Videos, STINAPA enlisted the help of local fishermen. This year, STINAPA reached out to our local fisheries cooperation and is working with several fishermen to catch and tag sharks for Bonaire’s first acoustic telemetry study.

### **Partnerships with the Government**

In 2018, STINAPA partnered with representative from the local and national government during the renovation of several commercial piers in Kralendijk, Bonaire. Throughout the project, government representatives, contractors and stakeholders met frequently to discuss and plan, a budget was included specifically for the conservation of marine life, and the pier was renovated with as little impact to the marine environment as possible. STINAPA assisted the commercial divers, alerted the contractors when workers were not following agreed-upon protocols and oversaw the transplantation of corals and sponges.

Several ministries in the national government are also drafting an ambitious nature policy plan that addresses many targets to improve water quality and coral reef resilience. Stakeholders participated in a series of meetings to streamline the plan and STINAPA met multiple times with the representatives of the different ministries to address and influence the nature conservation and management priorities within the plan.

### **Conclusions**

Stemming from a common desire to safeguard Bonaire's natural resources, recognized as the main drivers of the local economy, private and public partnerships are possible through effective communication and willingness to invest the time needed to develop sustainable paths. Achieving Blue Destination status, or rather going forward sustainably, means different things to different people. From fishermen, to government entities to private corporations, STINAPA is finding common ground in which to bridge the gap and achieve sustainable solutions.

**KEYWORDS:** Blue Destination, Bonaire National Marine Park, public private partnerships, STINAPA, sponge transplantation

### **LITERATURE CITED**

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