

rising tides • issue no. 1

moosumi



Table of Contents

Preface	3
Seeking Hope in a Sinking Home	4
Field Notes from the Intertidal Zone	16
Shuaila's Paintings are Alive	28
Rising Seas and Shopping Sprees	40
South Ari: Sanctuary in Peril	50
Beauty in Growing Your Own	62
Deep Into the Depths with Shafran	66
The Lost Island	80
About Moosumi	89

Preface

Time is an ocean. The past, present, and future flow in one tide. Our story is that of our ancestors and those yet to come.

Stories are windows to the past and relics for the future. Though we do not know what the future holds for us, I find strength in tales of hope.

Moosumi's first issue, *Rising Tides*, gives voice to those who yearn for a life attuned with Earth. Let these stories be records of a people living in a garland of islands amidst the climate crisis.

Ijunad Junaid, Executive Editor

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**Seeking Hope in a
Sinking Home**
by Isha Afeef

Three**Two****One**

With a flutter of my fins, I dove into the ocean. I felt the ocean's weight gently push me to the surface. My heart was beating slowly in my chest. Another kick, and I swam closer to the reefs curving around the island and hugging the coast.

Hirigaa (Porites corals) that withstood the ocean's currents for over 200 years stood suffused with Christmas tree worms. A *Kandu Guruva* (juvenile Oriental Sweetlips) wiggled in camouflage next to it. A broken branching coral lay hopelessly on the ocean floor on its way to become rubble. New coral larvae had settled on its surface, and the young corals were home to groups of anemone fish.

**There was a small
feeling
in my throat
— a gentle nudge to
breathe.**

I looked up — the ripples on the water's surface were broken by white light. Unicornfish darted in the ripping waves at the surface. I let the water carry me up, looking around as I did so; and there, in the distance, I saw the shadow of a shark.

I was humming contently as I breached the water.

Megafauna are a sign of life, of biodiversity — a sign of hope.

Looking for hope while living by the sea is intentional.

It is the one medicine that soothes the anxiety of living on a small island nation amidst the climate crisis. The fear that the rising tides will sweep us under the ocean is age-old; growing up, the whispered promise of relocation to Australia if our lands were overpowered by the sea seemed fantastical.

With the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami that swept across the Indian Ocean, the country had its first climate refugees: islanders resettled in higher grounds because their water reserves were salinized and their beach barriers were destroyed, leaving behind ghost-towns in atolls like Raa.

...And we did not talk about it, not really.

There were reports, sure.

Still, because our islands are geographically isolated, it was easy to forget the ones that were sinking. *The ones that are sinking right now.*

In July 2022, the country experienced severe storm surges that washed away entire beaches with waves that reached far into the islands' hearts. Among the most impacted by the storm was G. Dh. Madaveli island, where the Madaveli-Hoadedhdhoo causeway blocks proper tidal flow between the islands. The causeway, which cost \$1.8 million, is mired with controversy; its Environmental Impact Assessment warned that it will cause flooding, and Hoadedhoo residents would periodically disconnect the causeway as an act of defiance.

Despite this, the project was completed, and the Madaveli's inhabitants spent many days with their houses flooded. The water didn't claim any lives; it just slowly lapped at their feet, destroying property and livelihood.

Nearly all of Madaveli flooded that July.

Further down south, at least 50 residences in Maradhoo-Feydhoo suffered, with some families requiring temporary relocation.



photo by Azaan Zameel

It is hard to shake off the feeling we are suffering due to something we are not fully responsible for. Small island nations' inhabitants are not responsible for the world's rising temperatures. Powerful and wealthy hoarders scurry across the Earth in their private jets while preaching individual action and responsibility as the cure-all for the climate crisis, despite their emissions single-handedly overwhelming smaller countries'.

Even at a local scale, we can attribute irresponsible reef and coastline destruction that alters the water-flow within atolls to the governments' decision-making. Decisions are made by elected officials, sure; but residents are hardly, if ever, consulted. Selling islands or leasing land to the tourism industry — for the global North's enjoyment — has continued without proper environmental regulatory framework for years. It's hardly a choice; we are just left with the remnants.

It is hard to grapple with how young our country really is; emigration to our islands began about 4600 years ago.

Yet, we are caught in the thick of the modern climate crisis. Our monsoons are no longer predictable. Warmer Aprils, erratic weather patterns, and more rainbows above our stretch of blue. As beautiful as they are, the rainbows signify a daunting fact..

This is no longer our ancestors' world. Our indigenous Nakaiy calendar predicting the ebb and flow of the ocean's cycles are now mere suggestions.

The climate crisis
is not just about
warming; it is about change

**A change that we are
not ready for**

photo by Isha Afeef



There are islands that are slowly sinking — barely above water level, asking the government for help. “More wave-breakers,” they ask. “More development. Better harbors.”

“Mitigation measures.”

The islands are throwing out their life rafts, all in an effort to keep on going just a little longer in a sinking country.

**

The Maldives grew from coral larvae settling over volcanic mouths at the ocean floor. Through the ice ages, with the world mellowing and heating, the corals grew higher and higher with their arms stretched towards the skies. Started from the bottom and now we are here; years of history distilled to give us a moment on this land. A gift in the making.

Now, a gift under threat. Facing recklessness, apathy, and destruction, there are those among us fighting tirelessly to protect this gift through various practices and studies.

Coral restoration is a good popular example — finding ‘corals of opportunity’ that were already broken or wouldn’t have the chance to survive, and securing them on coral frames or lines to give it a better chance for survival. Coral restoration or coral gardening is practiced at nearly every resort with a vested interest in marine biology, and even by environmentalists at Villimale’ beach and V. Fulidhoo. It supports reefs under threat and gives them new life.

Moreover, there is also new research exploring the coral’s natural resilience and ability to reproduce. In 2021, Researchers at Maldives Underwater Initiative reported six unique spawning events within a year; previously, corals were believed to only spawn twice annually. We could utilize the frequent spawning events as an intervention method to aid reefs’ recovery — repopulation through natural sexual reproduction can increase genetic diversity and abundance of corals on the reef.

The reef’s ability to bounce back with spawning events — despite increasing warming events — could mean that the Maldives is much more resilient than once believed.

...And so are the marine animals using our land and sea as their key habitats. Sea turtles can return to nest in the same general area they were born in, and their remigration takes place after 25-50 years once they reach sexual maturity. Last year, there were increased reports of sea turtle nesting across the country, which is hopeful for a species threatened with extinction. Only 1/1000 eggs laid by turtles are estimated to survive to adulthood due to their slow growth.

This is why it is important to protect habitats long-term, and efforts to do so are underway in the Maldives. The Maldivian government is designating nesting beaches, reefs, mangroves forests, seagrass meadows, and even off-shore areas as protected areas to increase biodiversity, safeguard species, and ensure the survival of fish stock.

There are more and more opportunities for further research, education, and grants. Locals are stepping up into the forefront combining cultural knowledge with modern sciences — traditional solutions with technological innovations.

Where once was *anxiety*,
there is **action**.

The intentional willingness
towards preservation.

It is slow-paced,
just like our country’s
formation. There is the fear
that these efforts at
rescuing our natural
resources are too little too late;
yet a little can go a long way,
and at least paves a path.

If you ever feel overwhelmed with climate anxiety — worrying about the next tide wave, the next bleaching event, or the next extinction — take a moment to walk along the coastlines. Better yet, wander into the sea.

Take a breath.

Kick down.

*Let the sea embrace you
for a moment.*

There is healing in the saltiness. The aim is not just to survive this; but to find a way to live intimately in our home, connected to the more-than-human life around us.

*It helps to remember why
we want to protect it.*

A black and white topographic map of a coastal region, showing contour lines and a prominent bay or inlet. The map is partially visible on the left and right sides of the page, framing the central text.

Farah Dhiun:

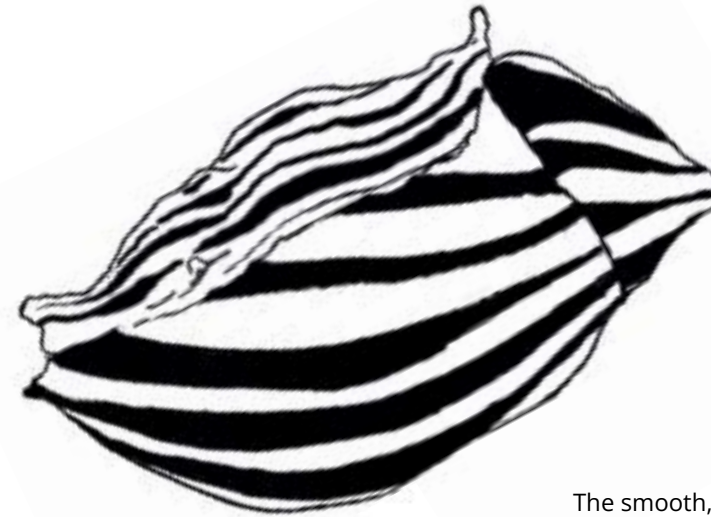
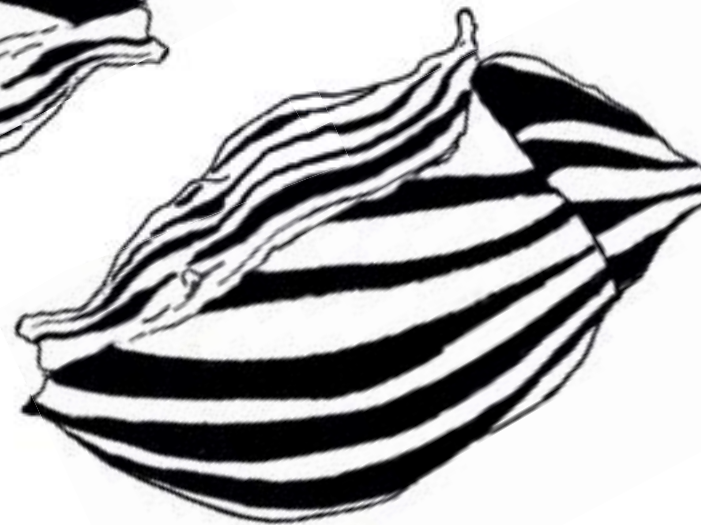
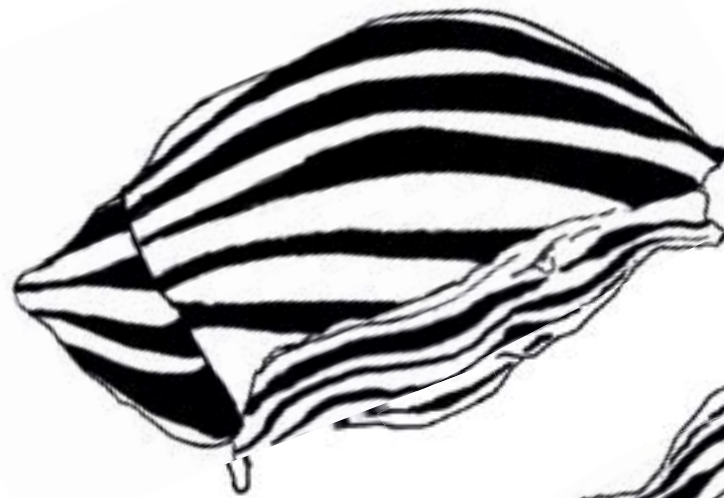
**Field Notes from the
Intertidal Zone**

By Enas Mohamed Riyaz

As the afternoon cooled down and the tides retreated, exposing the rocky shore and all its hidden treasures, we rolled up our sleeves and headed down to the beach carrying small buckets to search for little marine snails called nerites that adorn the reef substrate like sprinkles on cake. Golhaa nagan dhiun or gleaning — an age-old practice of harvesting marine invertebrates from shallow coastal waters during low tide — was what introduced me to the wonders of the intertidal zone.

Everyone wanted to pick out the largest nerite. It was especially gratifying to find one that was particularly better at hiding, blending between the rocks and crevices. After gathering a bucketful, we brought them home to be boiled, cleaned, cooked in spices, and eaten with roshi.

I remember how similar-looking nerites only had slight variations in the shell patterns; how the darker-shelled ones held on maybe a tad more tightly, their tentacles perhaps more conspicuous than the rest. The spiral-shelled ones were harder to clean even after removing the operculum, a calcareous trapdoor-like structure guarding the only opening in their small bodies. Until the shell is removed, not much is visible to the naked eye aside from the sticky, muscular foot covered in slime along with its head and sensory organs.



The smooth, lighter-shelled nerites were a favorite — we harvested these more than the others, which caused their population to temporarily collapse after our many visits to the reef. I cannot remember what I made of all these observations then, but I know that it has stayed with me for over 20 years. Core memories in the form of field biology notes.

In true Maldivian fashion, I spent a good part of my youth pondering marine fauna. Although their name (golhaa) finding its way into political slang was a misfortune the nerites had to bear, their closest relatives luckily escaped such a fate.

Take, for example, the Sa'ndhara legend: a folktale from the South about a turbinid sea snail gifted to the Queen of the Moon by a triggerfish to defeat a demon. The intertidal zone and its critters have always intrigued us coral-island folk. Many continue to explore the exposed coastal areas simply for a stroll, to harvest annelids and worms for fish bait, and to gather edible mollusks for a delicious dinner.

Though often overlooked as fishery, gleaning remains an important food source for island communities with women and children at this tradition's epicenter.

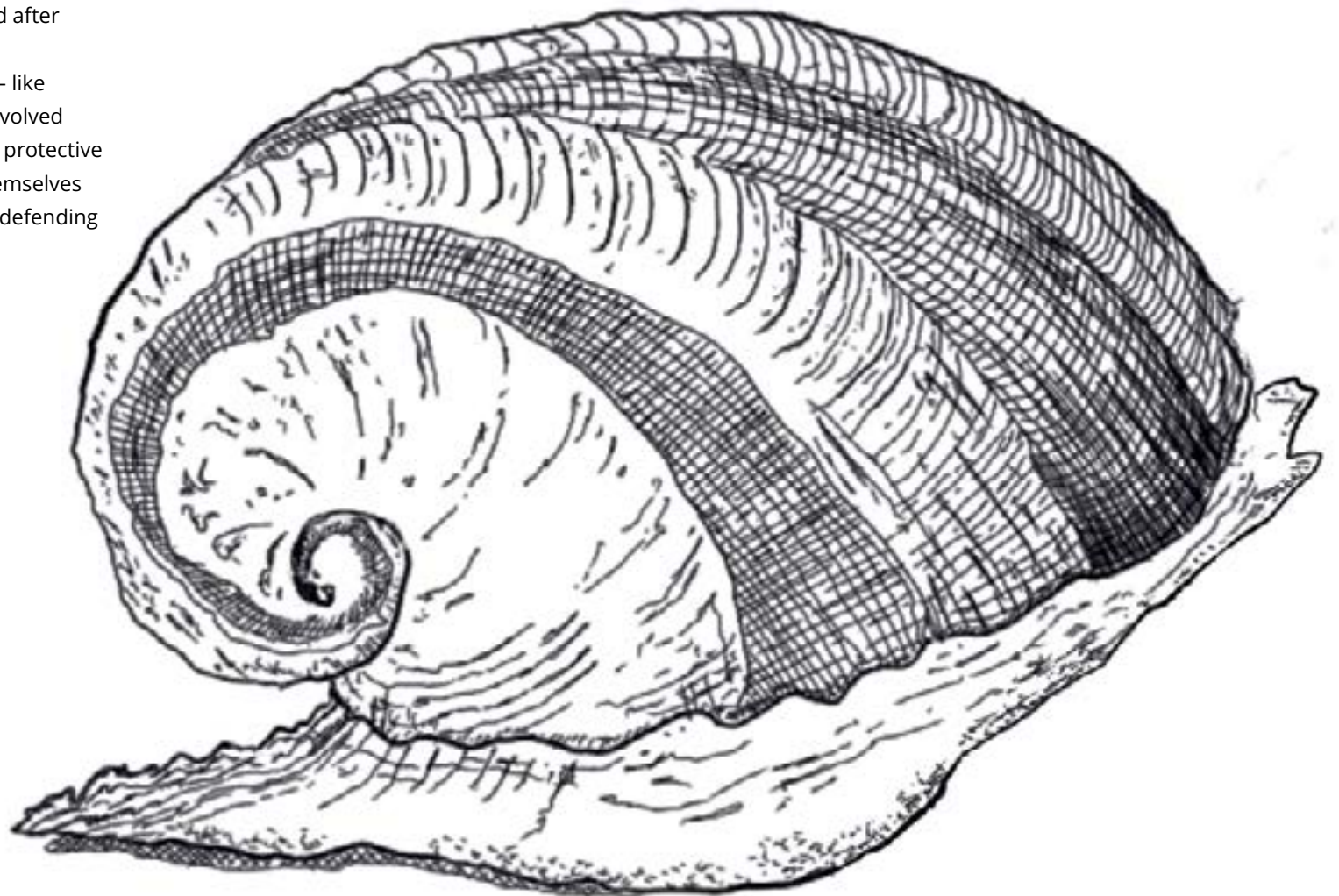
The intertidal zone, also called the littoral zone, is the area of the foreshore and seabed that is exposed to air at low tide and submerged at high tide. This shoreward fringe between the lowest and highest tides harbor some of the most resilient organisms that are constantly exposed to changing salinity, temperature, turbidity, and moisture. The organisms that inhabit this harsh environment have special characteristics to survive in these conditions — during low tide, some are easily spotted on seawalls, reef flats, crests; and some are better camouflaged

As an ecotone — or transitional — area between two biological communities, the littoral environment is complex and rich in biodiversity. Among the notable critters found in our backyard tide pools are octopuses, giant clams, several different crustacean species (like crabs and shrimps), gastropod sea snails, annelid worms, sea-stars and of course, corals and fish. It is always interesting to see how their sightings vary from the shore to the reef crest and forereef beyond, providing important clues on how they have adapted to the different zones in the intertidal area.

One behavioral adaptation used by some organisms in the littoral zone to avoid thermal extremes is being active only during the low tides in the evening or at night, sticking to scars on the rocks for homing when the organism is inactive.

This behavior is observed in the famously harvested Sa'ndhara snails like *Turbo petholatus* which are only gleaned after sundown when they are active.

Some organisms exposed to air — like nerites, barnacles, and clams — evolved physiological adaptations such as protective coverings like shells to defend themselves against desiccation in addition to defending against predators.

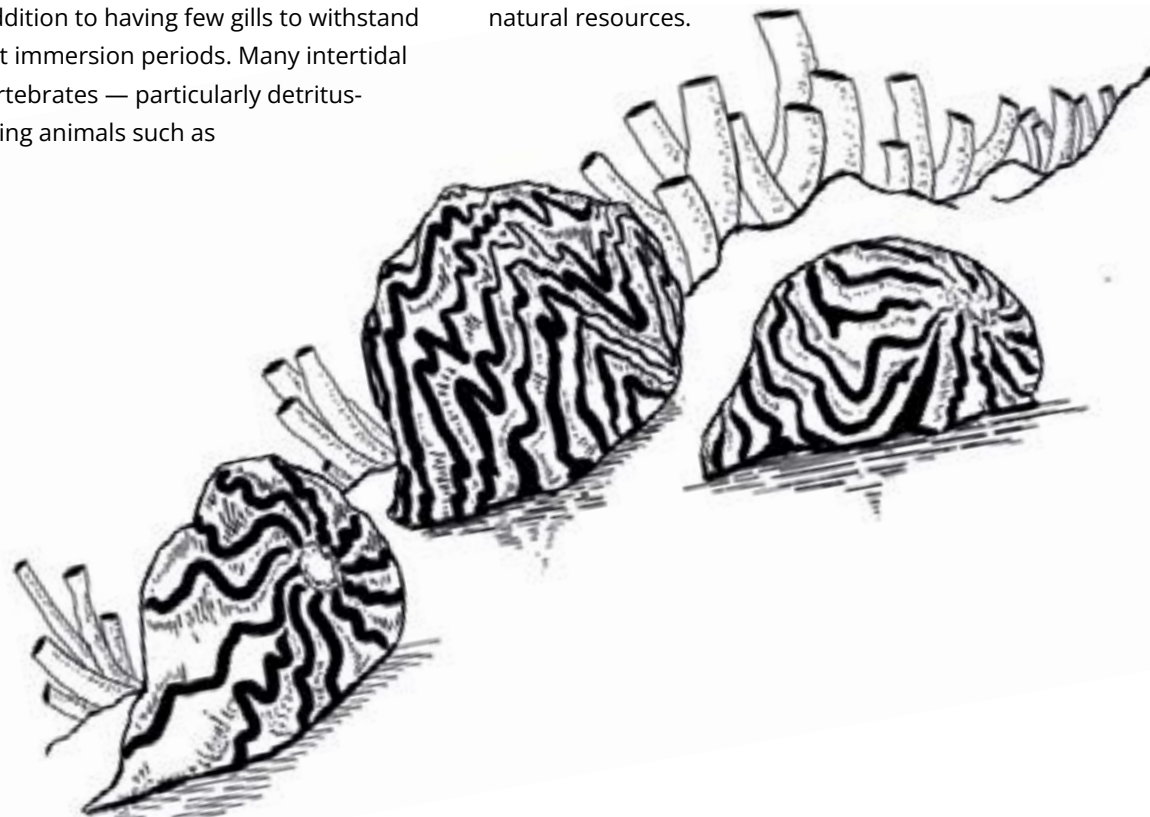


Sessile animals like barnacles that need to withstand the crashing waves by sticking to substrates have interestingly developed protruding reproductive organs that they can alter to suit wave action to seek out mates while still anchored to their rocks.

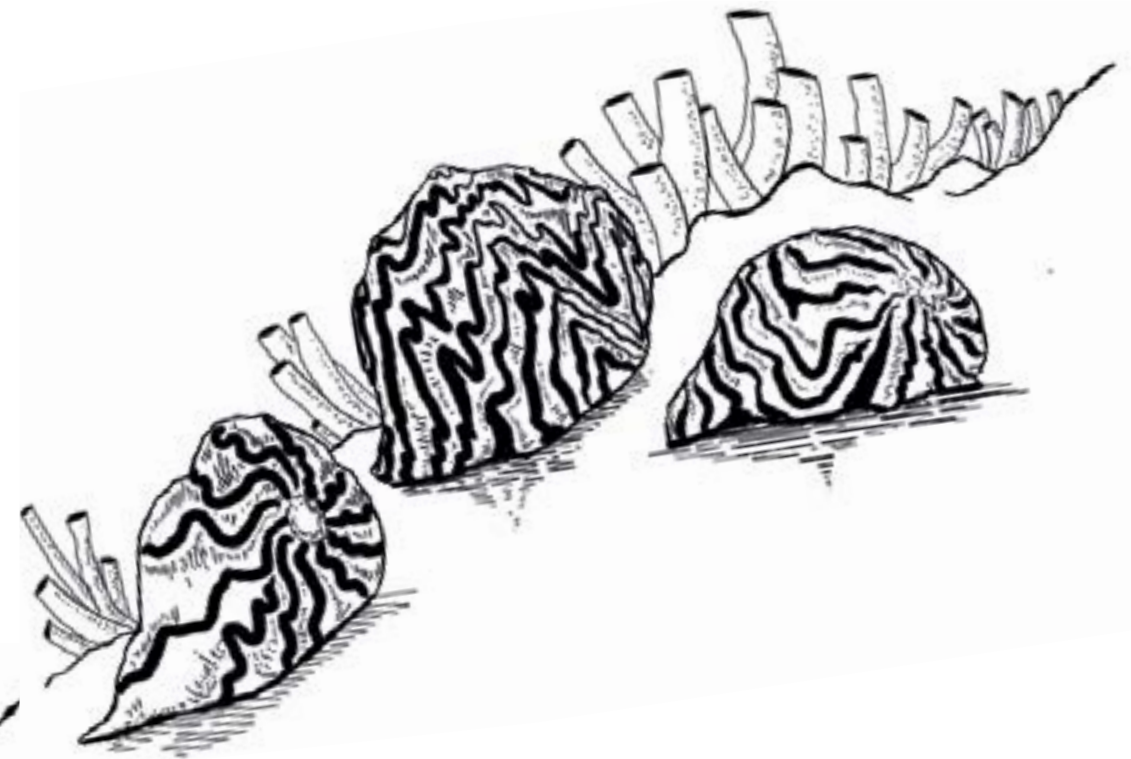
Some intertidal crabs persevere through fluctuating moisture changes by keeping their gills moist using articulating plates that block dry air entering the gills; while crabs like the superabundant thin-shelled rock crabs *Grapsus Tenuicrustatus* — commonly seen in islands' breakwaters and reef crests — have adapted to the supralittoral zone by evolving to breathe air in addition to having few gills to withstand short immersion periods. Many intertidal invertebrates — particularly detritus-feeding animals such as

hermit crabs — are camouflage masters; they also utilize the continual replenishment of food brought about by the sea.

The intertidal zone is undoubtedly an exciting place both ecologically and culturally. It grants you easy access to explore diverse life forms, making for a convenient adventure any Maldivian can enjoy. However, with the ever-increasing coastal modifications and decreasing accessibility to reefs across the country, the Anthropocene in Maldives is not only chipping away a traditional sustenance source; but also, a golden opportunity for wonder, curiosity, and stewardship towards natural resources.



illustrations by @mas.mirus



In the meantime, I hope we become a generation that pays close attention to the natural world. These reefs hold so much history, but also much more to discover. As homage to the Maldivian saying, ***it's time we went to the reef without our mother telling us to.***



photo by Enas Mohamed Riyaz

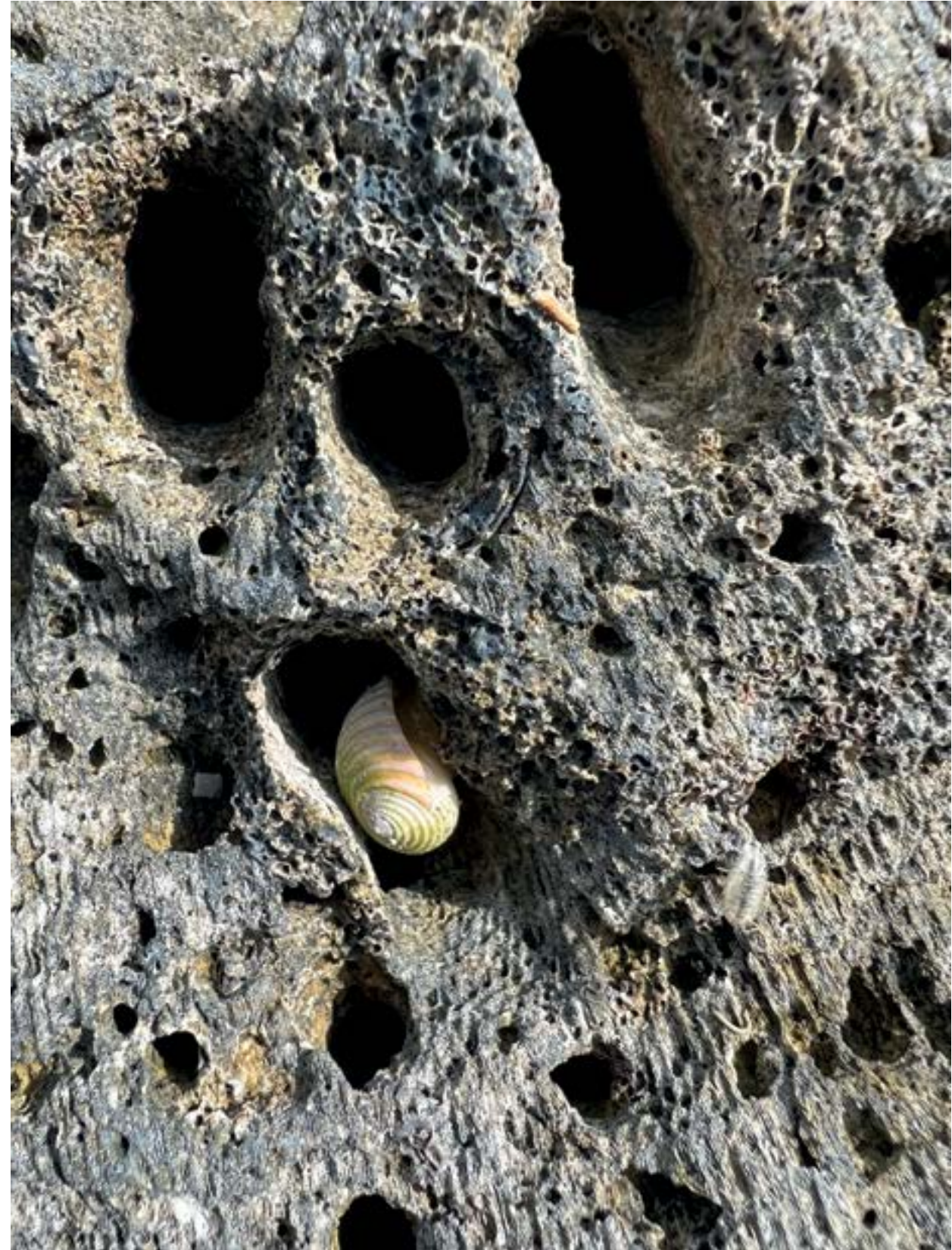


photo by Enas Mohamed Riyaz



Shuaila's
Paintings
Are Alive

afterglow, 2022





Aishath Shuaila

A visual artist with a background in sustainable development. Through her use of colour, fluid brush strokes, and mark making, she portrays a reflection of the environment and her imaginary world. Her style is influenced by surrealism, post impressionism and magical realism.

Shuaila's love and fascination with nature is a prevalent theme in both her artwork and work in environmental management. She currently lives and works out of her home studio in Male'.

What made you fall in love with the natural world?

I have always loved it, but even more so as I got older. Nature is where I get most of my inspiration from. It puts things into perspective for me. There's a cycle of life and seasons; nothing exists in isolation, everything is connected.

Your paintings of the Maldivian flora are so vibrant and full of life. How do you manage to bring them to life so well?

Thank you! I'm always contemplating and feeling the energy of the place I'm at — whether it's a jungle, beach, or mangrove — there's so much life and movement there. I like to express that using colour and gestural marks. Sketching outdoors is also really enjoyable and helps me study the subject better.

You are so good at painting screw pine trees, shells, and even figures. Do you have a particularly favorite subject matter?

I'm drawn to anything with curves, patterns, and different textures. The pattern similarities in nature and humans — like freckles and spots on our skin — are particularly interesting to me.

Which artists inspire you?

Salvador Dali, Georgia O'Keeffe, Joan Miro and Hilma af Klint are some of my favourite artists. I also really love Stromae; he's not a visual artist, but I'm inspired by his music and authenticity.

blaze, 2022





The lush Maldives' flora and fauna are often not accessible to most of the Maldivian population. What role do you think art can play in inspiring a love and reverence for nature?

When I create the artwork, I also end up doing a lot of research and learning a lot about the subject. Just knowing more about what roles they play in our ecosystem makes me appreciate it a lot more.

I think looking at art can pique our curiosity and give us a fresh perspective. The special thing about art is that people will have an emotional connection to it. It makes us realise what's interesting to us and what we care about. I think having that sense of ownership and appreciation can lead to positive action.

What are your future plans?

To continue doing what I'm doing, build a sustainable art practice and grow as an artist.

morning alchemy 2022

dusk 2022



firecracker, 2022





storm, 2022

twilight jungle, 2022



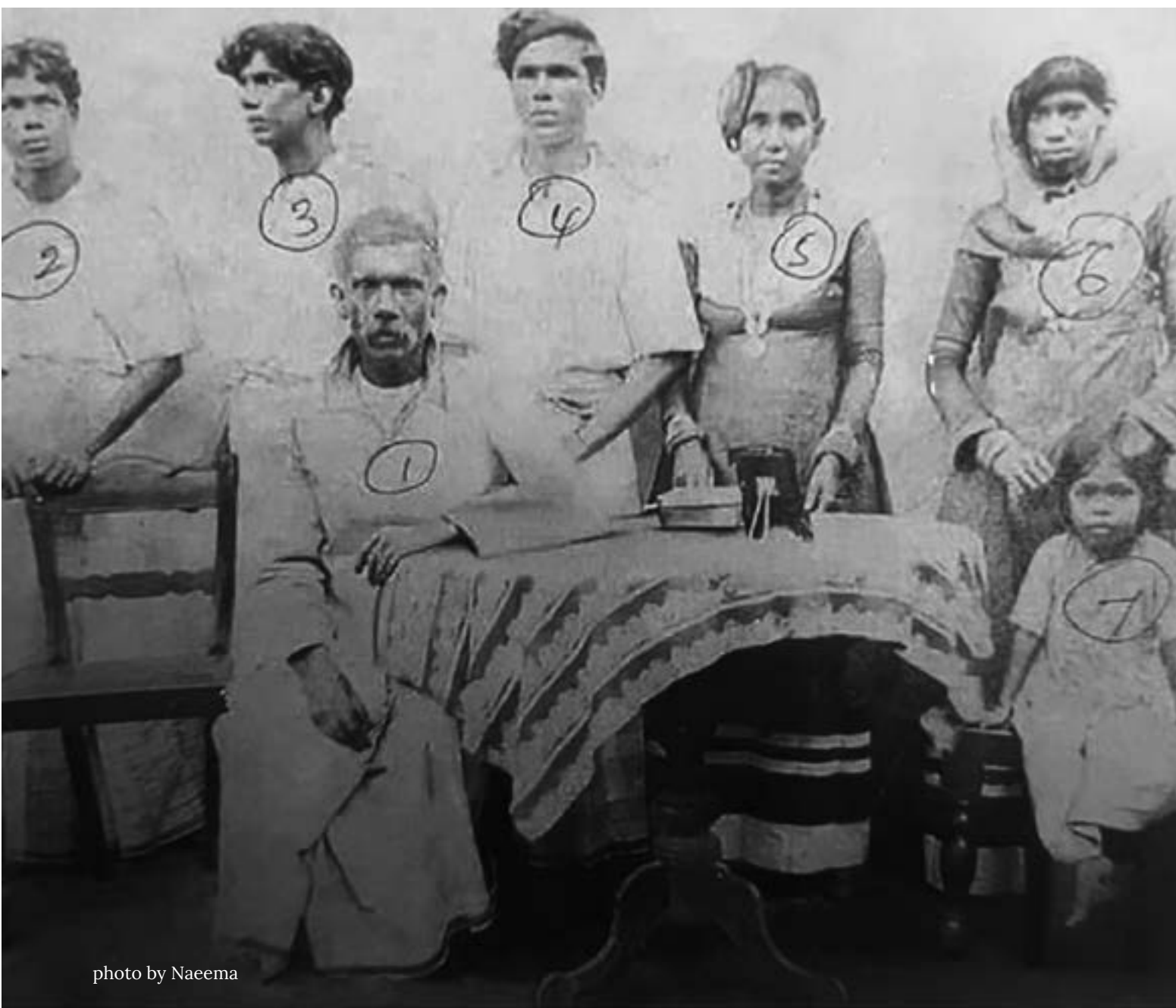


photo by Naeema

Rising Seas & Shopping Sprees

By Zara Athif



photo by Naeema

As I was setting off on a dhoni, I watched a maakana fly at the harbor's edge. He peered below, seemingly to hunt for fish. As the waves lapped against the harbor poles, the water was obscured by a sea of trash. The maakana picked away at discarded water bottles, a lone worn-out slipper, and even a floating shirt I almost mistook for a jellyfish. How did we reach this point? How did the world change so rapidly for us to wake up to an insurmountable mountain of trash polluting our soil, sand, and sea?

We are generating waste like our ancestors never have at a scale they could never have imagined. Consumer culture and dependency on retail therapy enabled buying in excess only to discard them shortly thereafter.

The fashion industry promises fulfillment and allure — just follow every micro-trend! No matter how many clothing hauls we do, the void of chronic dissatisfaction lingers. We still crave for more as we wait for the next "it" style. Fashion giants burn unsold stock — generating excess waste in the process — to promote these consumer trends and maintain exclusivity.

Not long ago, we sewed our own clothes with delicate hands and intricate movements. My great-aunt, a historian, explained how clothing was made in her days.

"In the 30s, we wore the authentic Dhivehi Libaas. Creating a Dhivehi Libaas was not usually a one-person job. It was a tedious yet beautiful process, but we do not see it anymore. It is a dying practice."



One group was involved with sewing the dress, while another specialized group worked on kasabu gethun — the elaborate hand-stitching of the braided neckline, the kasabu boavalhu. “There were also a few who were so skillful they could do all these steps by themselves.”

Cotton, metallic, and silk threads were used in these braids. These braids were made on a gathaa fai, a wooden base. “Back then, the threads used to weave the kasabu braids were fused with real silver threads. The fabrics were usually imported from India by sea.”

“After the Second World War, we had a hard time getting the materials needed for Dhivehi Libaas. The government designated Dhigu Hedhun as the national dress, so people started wearing it. It is not nearly as complex as a Libaas.” While adults wore these detailed garments, children kept it quite simple. “The younger ones did not wear any upper garments. It was normal back then. They had their hair long enough to cover their chest.”

When my parents were growing up in the 70s, buying ready-made clothes was still an unfamiliar concept. They were rocking bell bottoms and funky shirts made with fabrics locally available to them. Professional tailors and family members alike tailored these clothes. “Most people knew how to sew back then; it was more about who was interested in it and who was not. Many people could operate the manual sewing machine too,” my father explained. For daily wear and special occasions, handmade clothing was the norm — and that made the garments unique. “We were stylish because we made them just how we liked them. Of course, we followed trends from the 70s, but what we wore then was distinctive to our personality and style.”

As a young girl, I remember waking up to the quiet, rhythmic sound of my grandmother working the sewing machine to make me a set of night dresses. She does not even need to measure me; one careful look and she would get to work. Fabric stores were a maze I did not mind getting lost in. My eyes would widen at the sheer abundance of fabrics of every color, pattern, and material you could imagine.

As imports and international trade developed, I had myriad options with fabrics compared to my parents’ era. I felt pretty in the dainty dresses she’d make after letting me choose from many stitches the machine would allow. As I grew older, store-bought clothes had become the norm — they became what my wardrobe mainly consisted of. Ready-made clothes became too convenient. Our lifestyles adapting to a fast-paced world did not allow us the time to make hand-made clothes.

Slowly, fast fashion became more widespread in the Maldives. Our remote island geography prevented us from hopping onto the fast fashion bandwagon earlier; the exorbitant shipping costs made it expensive.



photo by Naeema

Over the past few years, brands like SHEIN and Pretty Little Thing have started shipping directly to the Maldives. While this makes everyday clothing more accessible, affordable, and convenient to the public, we are also seeing western consumerist trends creep in.

We have prioritized quantity over quality, which has devalued our clothing. This wasteful culture's impacts are devastating and complex. While paying a few bucks for a pair of jeans may seem small, there is a hefty environmental price we pay for our clothing needs. The fast fashion industry is extremely carbon intensive. The waste it creates is in quantities we cannot manage. Our landfills are so over-burdened, the clothes we discard are washing away into our oceans. Our coastal infrastructure is getting destroyed, and the currents are swallowing up our beaches and trees. There is also sweatshop labor exploitation upon which the fashion industry stands. Still, it is not too late to fight for change.

We have much to learn from our ancestors' wisdom. They placed high value on their clothings, for they were created with patience and care. These clothes were made as durable as possible. Flaws in the garments were mended, while worn-out clothes were repurposed. Sewing was considered a life skill. Intentionality was practiced rather than overindulgence.

We can still see remnants of our traditional practices today. Some people often tailor clothes for special occasions and carefully preserve them for coming generations. While the style and type of clothing most people wear has drastically changed over the years, it is still fairly common to sew everyday clothing. Some of us still pass down our clothes in crisp conditions to our younger siblings. Artisans work to preserve our historical sewing methods by learning from their elders. There is so much potential for us to embrace our cultural traditions once more, as we still have not strayed too far from it.



South Ari: Sanctuary in Peril

By Chloe Winn



photo by Chloe Winn

The sky was heavy with overcast clouds, threatening rain as we conducted our routine survey; our eyes scanned South Ari's outer reefs hoping to spot the world's largest fish: the whale shark.

Boats were clustered together by the handful outside Maamigili airport near a throng of people frantically swimming to capture the all-important shot of the famed fish. However, the photograph I was out to capture was not artfully framed nor was it meant to be a precious memory; but rather, one which best documents the most shocking whale shark injuries I have ever seen.

His white connective tissue was exposed, the wound viciously ripping across the head and gills, and was marbled with yellow and red as he swam at a slow, labored pace. It was striking how close together the propeller lacerations were. The injury's severity indicated just how fast the boat was traveling — certainly not within the 10-knot speed limit required in the South Ari Marine Protected Area (SAMPA). As I finished collecting ID photos, I noticed the healed amputation to the caudal fin and instantly recognized this individual as WS220 Kuda Kudey.

Since 2006, the Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme (MWSRP) has been collecting data in Alif Dhaalhu atoll and is working hard to understand how whale sharks use this area.

Aided by MWSRP data, passionate citizen scientists, and local indigenous knowledge, we learned that juvenile whale sharks use this area as a 'secondary nursery,' with cruising as a predominant behavior. Boasting the world's highest natural residency rate of any whale shark aggregation, one could say South Ari atoll is perhaps the closest whale sharks have to a home.

For this highly mobile shark, time at the surface is when individuals engage in their thermoregulation process by basking in the warmth of the shallows after deeper dives in order to recuperate. For Kuda Kudey and hundreds of other individuals in our database, this is unfortunately why they risk getting unintentionally struck and injured by vessels.

In the last decade, MWSRP data has observed a noticeable increase in the number of vessels operating within SAMPA on a daily basis; and subsequently, 66% of individuals in South Ari have suffered injuries at some point throughout their lifetime, with an average of three major injuries to each shark per year as of 2019.

Most individuals in South Ari are still in their adolescence; to spend several months allocating vital energy towards healing a major injury will cost them significantly and potentially affect their long-term development. According to a 2021 impact of injury report, whale shark sightings in SAMPA from 2014-2019 have decreased significantly.



Dr Jessica Harvey-Carroll — the injury impact paper's author — comments: "we know that the abundance of whale sharks is rapidly declining and this is not helped by the vessel induced injuries. Given the extent of injuries seen on these sharks, it's not surprising that they may have learnt to associate boats with injuries and in turn, pain."

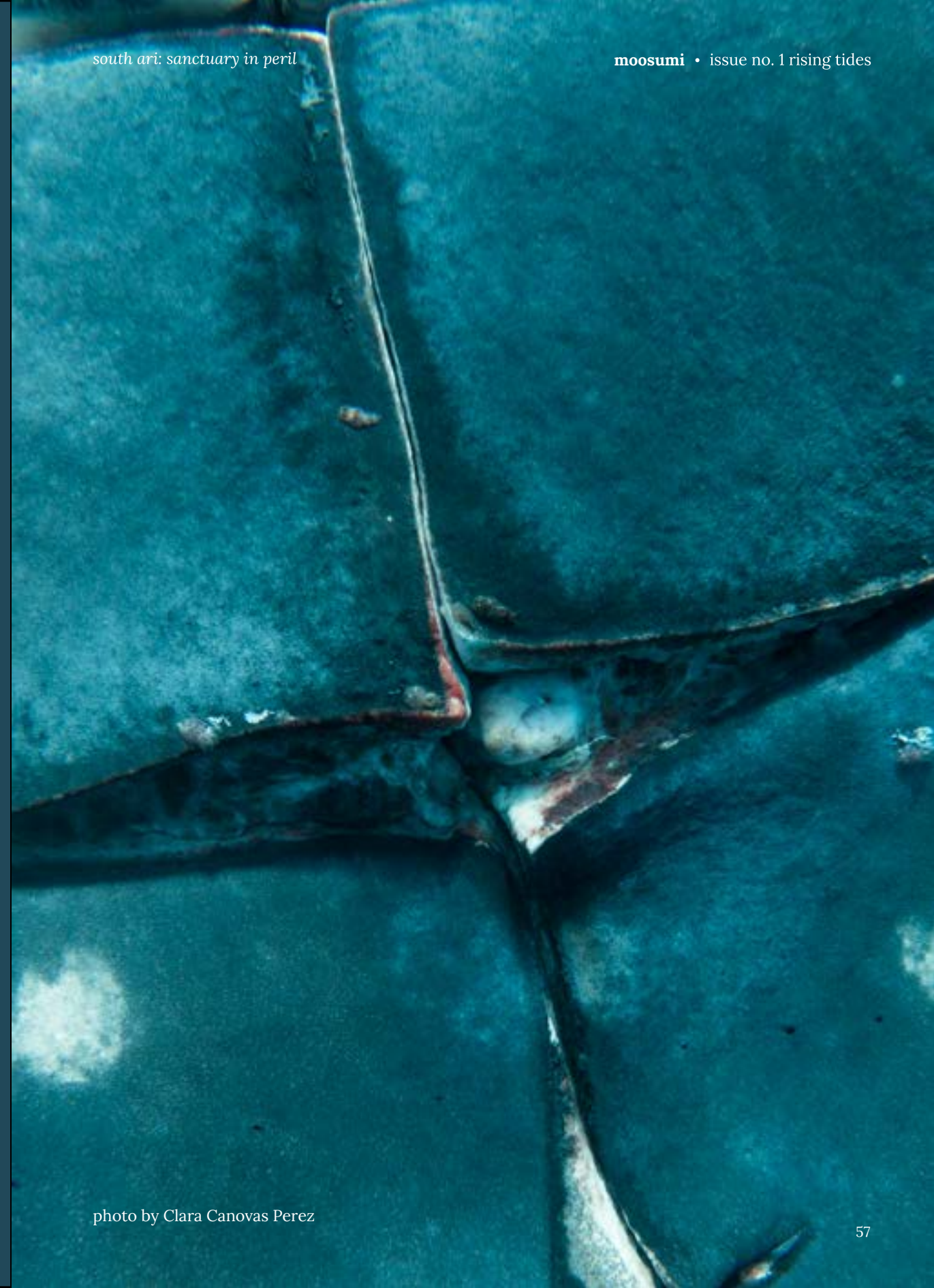
MWSRP's injury database contains harrowing photos, some dating back to 2006. From major lacerations to complete amputations, it is not beyond the realms of possibility to say that SAMPA and the wider Maldives play host to the world's most injured whale shark population.

The uptake in vessel traffic and crowds also correlates with an increase in dangerous encounters for both people and whale sharks. Hussain Fayaz, a guide with 11 years' experience in South Ari, says "I always fear crowded encounters for my own safety and that of my guests and whale sharks." Many local guides echo this concern, including Ahmed Dhain Zuhury: "I do at times fear for my safety and have been pulled down several times while in an encounter."

There were occasions when MWSRP staff members had to abandon in-water data collection to help panicked tourists who cannot swim well or forgot which vessel belonged to their operator. Regarding my own experience, I can firmly say there were times when I was anxious in the water as well as on-board while watching others. I have seen boats entering encounters at dangerous speeds mere meters away from snorkelers.

I recently captured a 20-vessel armada speeding towards an encounter via drone footage. It is a fact that humans were also injured in this area. Just last year in April 2022, a guest suffered a severe propeller injury to both of her legs in the whale shark area. Her story and condition post-incident remain unknown and do not appear in any local or international news searches.

Without an in-field regulatory body to govern them, speeding to and from encounters has become normalized among some (not all) operators. Aside from this being problematic in regard to injury, it also fosters the mindset of quantity over quality for people's encounters with whale sharks.



Suju, a local guide in Alif Dhaalhu says 'speeding has become the new norm in South Ari — especially within the past three years — and it is going up week by week. With more demand from tourists to encounter the whale shark, boats from all over the country — not just South Ari — are speeding in the MPA where whale sharks come to rest.'

While it is obviously nobody's intention to cause these gentle giants harm, the fact remains that these catastrophic injuries have increased over these last years, which certainly poses questions regarding the decade-old marine "protected" area's effectiveness...

Spanning 42 kilometers long with a 1-kilometer boundary, regulating SAMPA remains no easy or inexpensive feat. That said, this decade-long conversation regarding the SAMPA's chaos and its desperate need for rangers is at a crossroads with the current situation of unsustainable tourism in the area being inconsistent with the Maldives' image as one of seventeen shark sanctuaries worldwide.

Leggi, a guide local to Dhigurah, and previously employed as a SAMPA ranger for a time, pre-pandemic, comments: 'rangers could prevent the speeding and minimize the number of people for each encounter. They need to be assigned as soon as possible and start controlling the area for the sake of the future. All the stakeholders should learn, protect, and do the right thing before it's too late. Everyone should take this seriously and carry out their role to protect our marine life.'



photo by Suju Gasim



While implementing regulation to SAMPA is a momentous task that requires engagement and follow-through from policy makers and stakeholders, the demand for this change also needs to come from the tourists visiting Maldives. I am heartened by the fact that the conversation has grown in the past few years, especially on social media within the local and international community.

Many people, including guides and the general public, will often approach MWSRP requesting our visual briefing pack and code of conduct materials (translated into 7 languages) to further aid guides in their task of briefing guests.

This change's rising momentum extends further with the newly incited online campaign Be Gentle to Giants — a collaboration between Maldives Resilient Reefs and Blue Marine Foundation — which aims to encourage tourists to seek out ethical whale shark experiences with operators committing to outlined campaign principles.

During a recent encounter with Kuda Kudey, I dove down alongside him and examined his gill clefts — they had healed impressively, in a somewhat contorted and deformed way. That day, he cruised for close to half an hour, gliding over a reef laden with ochre-yellow table corals which, just a few years ago, were nothing but small recruits on a sparse and mostly dead reef. South Ari is an incredibly special place unlike any other whale shark aggregation in the world. If there is no tangible action soon, it is possible could continue to see a drastic decline in — or even lose — Alif Dhaalu's whale sharks altogether.

Beauty in Growing Your Own

By Salma Fikry

photos by Simi, Michael Kucharski,
Matthias Cooper, Shahid, Abi Jacob
Jonas Kakaroto, Sukhjinder
and Karolina Grabowska

Rows of Marigold dancing in the sunbeams; a field of pastel Moss-Rose stretching out to meet the bright yellow Cosmos encircling a muddy man-made pond; Bougainvillea of varying colors blooming in the bright sun; ten thousand square feet of land planted with flowers is certainly not a common farming practice in the Maldives.

If you ask Hassan Shahid why he planted flowers instead of crops, he would tell you he wanted to do something beautiful and *beneficial*. Flowers are beautiful, that much is commonly understood. It is the beneficial part that eludes most people. Most farmers give little thought to the benefits flowers bring to their crops.

As a child growing up in Addu Atoll Meedhoo — an agricultural island — Shahid remembers what farming was like on the island when he was younger. Farmers did not use pesticides or imported compost; people relied on natural procedures like creating and using homemade compost. There was no need to manually pollinate the flowers. The bees and insects played their part to ensure the flowers' bloom. Yield cultivation followed an organic process.

"You do not see so many bees or butterflies now," said Shahid. To pollinate the pumpkin or the passionfruit, Shahid gets up at the crack of dawn. He has to differentiate male flowers from female ones to pollinate them. The pumpkins, passionfruit, and watermelons we eat may not exist if not for this process.

"I want to bring back the bees and butterflies. There are many benefits for the farmlands in reverting to natural and biological farming methods — benefits for our health, for the soil, and for the whole ecosystem," said Shahid.

"We ate a lot of taro when we were young," he reminisced. "Taro was our staple food, not rice. Rice is our staple now, although rice is not a local crop — taro is." Shahid would help his grandfather plant the tubers and later harvest them. In the past, taro was plentiful. Planted in wetlands and swampy soil, the taro harvested in the past yielded bigger corms (the edible root) than they do now. Today, taro cultivators across the country face daunting challenges, as taro fields face severe taro leaf blight. Other crops are also plagued with a similar plight. Plant diseases are more common now, and pesticide use to combat these diseases have grown exponentially.

Harvested taros were distributed to family members and neighbors, and even sent out as gifts outside the local island. Farmers would collect and store some for personal use as well. Harvested taros were also collected as community crops and stored in the Kaaduge' (the community food store) for emergencies.



The same principle guided breadfruit cultivation. Homes that did not have a breadfruit tree were not forsaken — they would receive a portion from neighbors and family members that had breadfruit trees. This is a beautiful and beneficial tradition that waned away with the advent of the industrial first-world and its mechanical ethos we have slowly imported into our culture.

Sadly, Shahid’s beautiful flower-laden farmland has withered away too. The COVID-19 pandemic left in its wake a floral necropolis; the mismanaged curfew — with its slow and untimely execution — left him unable to attend to the farm. The flowers died. There are only remnants left: a row of pink and red roses lingering in the aftermath.

Shahid’s farm — which previously cultivated bananas, sweet potatoes, pumpkin and passion fruit among the patches of bright blooms — went into decline. “I don’t use any chemicals or pesticides. I make my own compost and fertilizer. I do not use any expatriate labor to work on the farm. I water the whole farm with my watering can. Sometimes it takes two to three hours;

but I want to do it by myself — without the chemicals,” explained Shahid. “It took me two to three years to really bring the farm alive, and I will do it again, in sha Allah.”

“People were anxious about potential food shortages during the COVID-19 lockdowns,” Shahid recounted. “Anyone who had space in the back or front yard of their homes started growing crops. They planted pumpkins, bananas, eggplants, chilis, and passionfruit. When they planted crops at home, I noticed they refrained from using pesticides. They planted a diverse variety too, and that by itself is a means of biological control: when you grow a single crop, there is a higher possibility of faster and more extensive damage to all the plants if a disease occurs. It is always better to diversify crop cultivation, whether you are growing them on farmland or at home.”

Shahid ardently supports growing one’s own food. “There is beauty in plucking fruits, vegetables, and greens fresh from the garden onto your dinner table,” he recommended. He advocates for self-growth’s benefits too: “a household that grows their own food will not have to spend hard-earned income buying off the shelf.” He quoted prices in Maldivian Rufiyaa per kilogram at current market rates: MVR 50 for tomatoes, MVR 100 for green chilis, MVR 70 for capsicums, MVR 100 for passionfruit, MVR 35 for cucumbers, MVR 25 for pumpkins, MVR 35 for bananas.



“A family of seven can easily save MVR 1000-1500 from their monthly expenses if they grew their own crops. Plus, you would know how you grew it.” Growing our own food at home is an excellent idea. Unfortunately, years of unchecked destructive urbanization has forfeited the right to home gardening for those living in the capital, Male’. After concrete and traffic overtook every inch of soil, there is no space for life to flourish.

There is still hope for social infrastructures built around home-grown food — a more sustainable lifestyle — in other islands beyond the capital, however, where exploitative urbanization’s tendrils have not taken root yet.

Despite the beauty and benefits of home-grown food, the panic-induced home gardening practices have waned away. As for Shahid, his flower farm might have died, but he continues to grow his own food in his home garden among the surviving flowers.





*Deep Into
the Depths*
with
Shafran

photos by Shafran

Shafran

Based in the Maldives, Shafran is a scuba diving instructor and underwater photographer. Shafran's photography captures the essence of the beautiful and strange underwater animals and landscapes.

What made you fall in love with the ocean?

I remember when I was young, I used to swim a lot with my older brother and cousin at the swimming track. One day, we found a mask at the bottom and took turns to swim underwater wearing it. I loved the feeling of descending into the ocean and exploring. I used the mask for a long time until my brother bought me my own for my birthday. I started to free-dive regularly, and my passion for the ocean blossomed through it. It became a genuine passion of mine; this led me to become a scuba diver.

When did you first start diving? Do you remember how you felt after your very first dive?

My first dive was a short try-dive into the swimming track. It was during an event — and I really wanted to try it. There was not much to see in the swimming track, but as soon as I descended with the BCD, I was converted. I was excited by the experience of breathing underwater. From then onwards, I knew I wanted this to be a big part of my life.





Your photos reveal strange and surreal underwater creatures such as nudibranchs. Do you have a favorite fish species to photograph?

I never had a favorite species that I would particularly focus on. I just enjoyed the process of capturing and sharing whatever I see underwater. Recently, I developed an interest in focusing on the details of corals. I find nature's patterns and textures just absolutely fascinating.

What are some of the unique challenges when it comes to underwater photography?

I am still learning how to use different types of cameras. For example, switching from a GoPro to a camera designed to take macro shots means you have to think differently about the lighting and angles. So, a lot of it comes down to trial and error paired with patience, knowing that out of hundreds of shots, I might only be happy with a few. Timing is also a significant factor. Marine life does not pose for you.

During your years as a professional diver, have you witnessed a change in the Maldives' underwater landscapes? If so, what are these changes?

While I have only dived professionally for five years now, I have already witnessed the impact of coral bleaching on our reefs. Although many people are aware of the significant coral loss, I feel that many do not understand the detrimental effect of coral bleaching on declining fish populations. I have also noticed that the reefs are more damaged in popular dive sites.

Although our country is mostly sea, lots of people don't know how to swim. What do you think we can do to inspire people to swim, dive, and explore?"

I believe that many people have misconceptions about the ocean. Many view the ocean as a danger, and thus overlook the beauty and all it provides for us — especially here in the Maldives. We can change this perspective through better education and immersion inside and outside of schools. This can shift perspectives we have on the ocean towards a positive light.





What is your most memorable underwater encounter?

This is a very tough question as I had many amazing encounters in my short time as a diver. However, one encounter that stands out would be snorkeling alongside an ornate eagle ray in crystal clear water. Of course, it was the one day I did not have my camera with me!

What are your future plans?

I became a scuba diving instructor just a few months ago. So, at the moment, I am looking forward to progressing my skills and inspiring others to find their new passions. Underwater photography is also becoming more than just a hobby for me now, and I want to start making it a part of my career!

*See more of Shafran's work on Instagram
@shafrantothesea*





A monochromatic blue-toned photograph of a person taking a selfie in front of trees. The person is in the lower right foreground, holding a smartphone up to their face. The background is filled with the silhouettes of trees against a light sky.

The Lost Island

By Aishath Sara Arif

When I think of an untainted reality, I see a green-tinted vision of Malé City, nestled between poetry and childhood memories. I see tholhi swimming through the turquoise blues by the jetty, and my younger self sitting on top of the black cannon. It was a time when the sun was kinder — a friendlier warmth upon brighter trees, and sea breeze unscathed by the bustling streets. It is easier to imagine when I close my eyes and hold my breath, but it is tiring to shut my senses to find that place. The blank page before me has become as daunting as the streets, but I refuse to let it get in the way of my calling.

The promise of the metropolis comes with no warning: everyone needs an escape to survive in Malé City. When the dregs of the city clings to my skin, my only salve is to write or be alone. I've been sitting at my desk for the past few hours, but all I've achieved are ink-stained fingers and a dull body ache. A reclusive life can lose its charm when the itch to find a flow is insatiable behind these walls. It's too easy to give up on sea-locked land so defined by routine, but I needed a release.

Walking out the door, I was greeted by the foreboding that hangs around the city. From land reclamation to churning more concrete, our lives are ever-changing yet we're stuck in our ways. Although this metropolis is geared like a machine, an odd glimpse prevails of the paradise it professes. There is an old temple tree in the corner of the pavement across from my house, with long green leaves, prominent veins, and velvety white flowers with a bright-yellow heart. I remember the little joys from picking up fallen flowers, and the little sorrows from seeing them trampled over.

Life was simpler when I was younger, when there were no worries that the tree could cease to exist. It made me recall the thousand-flower tree that graced the plot of land beside my house. I climbed that tree every morning growing up, and the very first day I saw it in full bloom was the very same day that it was cut down. Seeing its body lying flat on the soil, I felt a deep sadness that resurfaced throughout my life.

Already losing hope in finding a spark, I trudged along a road so frequently taken. I noticed the shops that have changed over the years, and the surviving trees that formed a pretty canopy. Looking up to admire the swaying foliage, I reminded myself to not get attached. With no destination in mind, I reached the marble clearing in front of Sultan Park. Now robbed of its relic and a hazard in the rain, it no longer reflects the place it once was. No lush modernity could revive lost sentiment.

Even the pathway across from the park once held distinct memories. Made of white sand amid the other bleak streets, it was a simple pleasure that beheld our origin. As I walked along the marble through the fallen leaves, there was still some relief at the end of the path. Surrounded by grass on two sides from the centre, Sagarey Park still holds a lovely tradition. Like the balmy evenings from decades ago, a hundred wings soared through the sky as people gathered with fistfuls of rice. It was a sight so mundane, yet nostalgia in plain sight.

In this momentum of a sudden emotion, I found myself crossing to the markets by the sea. There were bundles of bananas loaded on the pick-ups, and a row of vendors with piles of fresh produce. I rarely walk through this ever-busy road, but I was always amused by its ancient buildings. With the old-fashioned windows and peeling paint, the walls and their marks carry ancient history.

On any other day, I would rush through the crowds with my eyes on the ground, but I finally felt a kindling of the forgotten spark. Holding my breath past the odour of the fish, I walked along the docks and towards the pier. As I stood atop the edge and peered at the sea, it was a sight so surreal — too magical for the city.

Gentle and majestic, myriads of rays were swimming below my feet, with a touch of reality from a floating orange peel.



photo by Aishath Sara Arif

Time slowed down amid the bustling market, and in these seconds of clarity, a graceful maakana flew over my head. I held my gaze until it perched atop a roof, and noticed the sky changing her hues. The clouds were a vision in golden lining, and it dawned on me that a wilderness exists within the constraints of the metropolis.

On the way back, I processed how much the environment has changed, and how solace in nature is sought from the exterior. From the rows of fithuroanu in the roads of Hulhumalé, to the cosy coves on Villingili beach. These were once a luxury that existed in the capital, with the trees of Usfasgandu beside the lost gaadiya, and when Artificial Beach was untouched by congestion. The influence of modernity is one that is contagious – all these islands face the imminence of change. To survive the reality of living in the capital, one must acknowledge the abject and the ordinary.

Once I reached home, I slowly walked along the tomb of my tree, and caught a blessed glimpse of a sapling on the wall. For the first time in my life, I felt a slight shift in my deep-set grief, and a sense of alignment glowed from within.

A Labour of Love From:

The Writers

Isha Afeef Isha Afeef is a writer, illustrator, and marine conservationist from the south of Maldives. Isha has over 5 years' experience working for environmental conservation. After learning to swim in her twenties and seeing the underwater world for the first time, she's working to foster love for the underwater world through different mediums.

Writing: Seeking Hope in a Sinking Home

Enas Mohamed Riyaz Enas Mohamed Riyaz (Tonti) is an ecologist with a special interest in field biology and taxonomy, primarily working with protected species conservation in Maldives. Aside from her work in environmental research, regulation, and enforcement at the EPA, she is passionate about science communication and celebrating the natural history of Maldives.

Writing: Farah Dhiun: Field Notes from the intertidal Zone

Zara Athif The vast oceans and unique island geography of the Maldives fascinated Zara from a young age. Inspired and curious, Zara developed a love for exploring the natural surrounding; the mangroves, reefs, and the beaches. Witnessing the unique marine biodiversity inspired Zara to document the environment through words and other mediums. Currently based in Malé, Zara works in the environmental research field after graduating with a BSc in Psychology.

Writing: Rising Seas and Shopping Sprees

Salma Fikry Salma Fikry is a freelance consultant working in sustainable development and development management. She is the recipient of the National Award for Promoting Good Governance in Maldives (2011) for her advocacy and work towards decentralization. Currently settled in Fuvahmulah City, Salma is a cancer survivor and advocates for organic farming.

Writing: Beauty in Growing your Own

Aishath Sara Arif Aishath Sara Arif is a poet, writer, and editor from the Maldives. Growing up in Malé and now studying in Boorloo (Perth, Western Australia), her writing explores nature, identity, and nostalgia, often referencing culture, childhood, and words from the Dhivehi language. She is currently in her final year of a Bachelor of Arts degree at The University of Western Australia, majoring in English & Literary Studies with a minor in Creative Writing.

Writing: The Lost Island

Chloe Winn Chloe is a passionate marine conservationist, working as the Lead in-field coordinator for the Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme. She volunteered with the programme in 2017 and never left! Since then, she has worked as a guide in Dhigurah and accrued considerable in-water skills and knowledge about the whale shark population in the South Ari Marine Protected Area (SAMPA). With a creative background, Chloe hopes to bring an interdisciplinary approach to conservation and outreach, to further amplify the plight of the whale sharks of the Maldives.

South Ari: Sanctuary in Peril

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About Moosumi

Moosumi is an online publication that writes with the belief that ecology, culture, and liberation are deeply intertwined.

In our fragile era of violent environmental degradation, we turn to stories of joy and hope. We want to reconnect with ourselves, our loved ones, and the Earth on which we stand.

Moosumi is an ode to the rhythms and cycles of Earth and a love letter to those who revere our water, air, and soil.

Cover photos by Azaan Zameel

A photograph of a bird in flight against a sunset sky. The bird is silhouetted against the bright, orange and yellow light of the setting sun. Below the bird, the dark silhouette of a mountain range is visible against the horizon. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

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