



St. Maarten's "Man of War Shoal Marine Park Established

On December 30th the Minister of Tourism and Economic Affairs the Honorable Mr. Franklin Myers signed a major step towards marine environmental protection for the country St Maarten when he approved the establishment of the Man of War Shoal Marine Park.

The boundaries of the Marine Park are between 18° N and 17° -57.0 N and 63° -01.03 W and 63° -04.05 W, in an area better known as "the Proselyte Reef Complex ". This area includes the island's most ecologically and economical important marine habitat, including extensive coral reef areas and seagrass beds. This area was chosen to be a priority for official conservation because of its intrinsic ecological, economic and cultural value. The Man of War Shoal Marine Park is a home and migratory stop over or breeding site for 3 IUCN Red List Species, 10 CITES Appendix I species and 89 Appendix II species. It is an area with a relatively healthy population of marine mammals including migratory whales and dolphins, numerous species of shark, sea turtles and numerous fish species. Studies conducted by the St. Maarten Nature Foundation have shown that biodiversity in this area, particularly coral reef density, is high and the economic goods and services which the ecosystem provides are in excess of fifty million dollars annually. The establishing of the Man of War Shoal Marine Park is also in accordance with the Specially Protected Areas of Wildlife (SPA) Protocol and with the Federal Decree on Maritime Management.

Previous plans to develop a Marine Park for St. Maarten were too complex by design which led to discontent with various stakeholders, especially fishermen who saw their traditional fishing grounds being encroached upon. The draft ordinance also clashed with the Minister's responsibilities for ensuring safe waterways and anchorages. Through various consultations and meetings between the various stakeholders it was decided to implement Marine Conservation on St. Maarten in stages, of which the establishment of the Man of War Shoal Marine Park is the first and most important step.

"We have been working very hard for very long to realize Marine Environmental Protection for St. Maarten, and now, with the hard work and guidance of especially Mr. Mike Stamm of the Department of Civil Aviation, Shipping and Maritime Affairs and through the appointment of the Honorable Minister Myers, Country St. Maarten has its first National Park, a protected area which will not only seek to protect natural marine habitat but which will also enhance St. Maarten as an environmentally sustainable tourism product", commented Nature Foundation Marine Park Manager Tadzio Bervoets.

NATURE FOUNDATION

Mailing address

P. O. Box 863

Philipsburg

St. Maarten

Netherlands Antilles

Physical address

Wellsberg Street 1 A

Unit 25-26

Cole Bay

St. Maarten

Netherlands Antilles

Phone: 599-544-4267

Fax: 599-544-4268

E-mail

info@naturefoundationsxm.org

www.naturefoundationsxm.org

A Member of



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The biodiversity of St. Maarten waters has been steadily degrading over the last four decades. The "eleventh hour" so to speak, has come and gone. The Man of War Shoal Marine Park also has significant economic importance as diving in Marine Parks is globally on the rise and generally accepted by the diving tourist as a "must do" vacation activity. With proper protection and management in place the establishing of a Marine Protected Area will increase the St. Maarten Tourism Product. Local fisheries will also be enhanced through environmental protection. Research has shown that Marine Protected Areas increase fish populations and fish size of commercial species in nearby fishing grounds.

As mentioned the Man of War Shoal Marine Park also includes Proselyte Reef, which was named after the HMS Proselyte, a 32 gun frigate which struck the "man of War Shoal" on September 4th 1801. Artifacts such as large anchors, cannons, barrel hoops, cannon balls, and pottery are still evident on this popular St. Maarten Dive site. The site is also considered a Marine Archeological treasure.

Efforts to establish a Marine Protected area for St. Maarten were started by the Nature Foundation upon its founding in 1997. After a considerable length of time during which numerous stakeholder consultations, meetings and deliberations were held this important first step has been taken by the government of new country St. Maarten. The Nature Foundation would like to acknowledge the help and support of the Honorable Minister Franklin Myers, Mr. Miguel de Weever, Mr. Lou Halley, Mr. Mike Stamm, Mr. Eddy Johnson, the VROMI Department, Ms. Olivia Lake, the late Mr. Joseph Vliegen, the late Mrs. Marjolijn Richardson, Andy Caballero, Paul Ellinger, Beverly Nisbeth, Robbie Cijntje, current Board Members and of course the dedicated staff of the St. Maarten Nature Foundation. The Dutch Caribbean Nature Alliance (DCNA) has been a continuous source of support and a resourceful partner of the St. Maarten Nature Foundation and has contributed greatly towards the realization of Nature Conservation in general and Marine Conservation more specifically for the island. In the coming weeks the St. Maarten Nature Foundation will launch a broad based information campaign explaining to the citizens of St. Maarten about their newly established Man of War Shoal Marine Park.