

HEPCA's Amr Ali fires broadside over wrecks

THE MANAGING DIRECTOR of a major Egyptian conservation group has gone on the offensive over dive-boat damage to Red Sea wrecks – and strongly defended the closure of two key attractions to allow wreck-conserving mooring systems to be installed.

The *Thistlegorm*, off Sha'ab Ali, was closed recently while a system of mooring buoys was laid, so that dive-boats would not continue to drop shots damagingly into the wreck. A pattern of buoyed diver descent and ascent lines has also been installed, to improve underwater safety for diving visitors.

Meanwhile the *Rosalie Moller*, on the other side of the Gulf of Suez, is due to receive similar treatment – but not before a mast, which had stood upright for years, was sent tumbling just weeks ago, after one dive boat too many had tied off to it.

The conservation projects have been driven by the Hurgada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA), which received criticism from some diving operators for the fact that the *Thistlegorm* was closed during peak season for the buoyage work to be carried out.

Amr Ali, HEPCA's Managing Director, responded in kind, with strong criticism of the leisure-diving industry. "Many diving operators consider the closure of the *Thistlegorm* impractical and have voiced their objections," he said. "However, the fact remains that we are losing this wreck and many others.

"Too many operators do not demonstrate any responsible behaviour of their own accord, and for that reason it is time for such intervention."

"Bigger and better" liveaboards had, he said, made the problem worse, because the vessels' added weight put greater strains on the wrecks – or reefs – to which they were anchored. The situation meant an "added responsibility to change the systems and procedures that are being used for mooring and diving

throughout the Red Sea".

About the loss of the *Rosalie Moller's* aft mast, Ali did not mince his words. It had happened due to the "carelessness of the liveaboard operators and their irresponsibility", he said.

"Only a few weeks ago the magnificent rear mast was upright and many a diver enjoyed diving around it," he said. "Many great photographs were taken of this mast and these images appeared in magazines around the world, which in turn created a desire for other divers to come and dive here.

"Over the years, many liveaboard operators have opted to tie their boats to the top of the mast. Now, alas, the mast is no longer standing in its majestic form."

DIVER contributor Mike Ward warned of the danger to the wrecks' masts in a feature, *Respect For Rosalie*, in May last year.

Going for the kill, and sparing not even holidaying divers, Amr Ali added: "What fell down last week was not just the mast of the *Rosalie Moller*. What fell down was the remaining respect that these liveaboard operators, dive guides and divers held for our Red Sea.

"What also fell down was any final shared sense of responsibility, team work and credibility. Now we will all be punished by the actions of the irresponsible few, and the Red Sea and its spectacular diving will be all the poorer."

But HEPCA was determined to stop the rot. "We are fed up with being asked to defend and apologise for our actions that are merely the last resort in a battle that has been going on for years, to ensure the future sustainability of our Red Sea," Ali said. "This is the responsibility of every diver, dive guide and diving operator."

Boat guests should, he said, keep a watch on how crews and guides moored on wrecks and reefs, the key being that tie-off points "make sense and do not endanger the divers, the wreck or the reef".

Irresponsible practices should, he said, be reported.

✦ As **DIVER** went to press in late November, work was progressing at the *Thistlegorm* site. According to HEPCA, an assessment had been completed, ready for the laying of the mooring system and dive lines.

Work was due to begin on 2 December and be completed by 10 December. The mooring system

entails eight stations arranged around the wreck site, each capable of accommodating three vessels.

Moored boats will need to deploy tenders to ferry divers to and fro between the moorings and buoyed descent and ascent lines, set directly over the wreck. ■



The aft mast of the *Rosalie Moller* when it was still upright, a haven for marine life.

JOHN BANTIN

BASKING SHARKS TURN OUT IN STRENGTH

FOR ONCE, SOME GOOD ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS! Basking sharks sighted in British waters have reached record numbers.

According to the Marine Conservation Society, which has been running basking shark research for 20 years, figures recently collated for 2006 gave 2222 sightings – a staggering increase over the previous year's figure of 1301.

"Sightings have risen consistently since 2003, but never by the 70% increase [over 2005] we saw last year," said Angus Bloomfield, MCS Biodiversity Projects Officer.

"While these figures are a record of sightings rather than numbers of sharks, they are very encouraging, and suggest that the population may be recovering as a result of protection."

Following a sustained campaign by conservation organisations, steered mainly by the MCS, the basking shark became protected in British waters in 1998.

The rise in sightings will have been encouraged further by warmer seas and, in recent seasons, bountiful summer planktonic blooms. ■