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SOS Dolphins at Samadai



One of the biggest concerns when living and working by such a fragile ecosystem as a coral reef, is whether the human activities can interfere with the wildlife up to an unsustainable point. And one of the biggest paradoxes surges when the very reason of the existence of an activity such as sea tourism, is damaged and finally disappears thanks to that very activity.

Shab Samadai is a remote beautiful reef off the coast of Marsa Alam, in the fabled deep south of the Red Sea, and it is home to a big number of spinner dolphins. It is part of the South Marine Park, and as such is protected by law 102 of 1983. Until some time ago, only diving safaris touched this underwater heaven, where scuba divers could observe these graceful creatures in their natural untouched habitat.

But as everywhere in the world, dolphins are a top attraction, whether in the wild or in theme parks. When the Marsa Alam airport was inaugurated more than a year ago, and many new resorts opened their doors, the number of visitors in the area increased dramatically. In no time the number of operators offering dolphin trips both for divers and snorkelers triplicated.

The result is that last summer the number of boats visiting Samadai reached the peak of 30 per day: an average of a whopping 500 people diving, snorkeling, swimming or simply freely stumbling around the small lagoon home to the spinner dolphins on a daily basis!

One doesn't need to be a marine biologist to understand that this amount of visitors can easily

ruin the delicate ecosystem and scare away the dolphins forever. With the cooperation of HEPCA (www.hepca.com) and the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (www.eeaa.gov.eg), the Red Sea Governorate issued an emergency decree in October banning completely boats from Shab Samadai until a preservation plan, such as limited and monitored daily access, is in place and running.

But with only 38 EEAA Natural Park Rangers responsible for more than 700km of coastline and marine reefs and islands, enforcement of the law is difficult if not impossible. The environment conservation in the Red Sea is sustained by funds, grants and donations by several international bodies such as USAID and the European Union, admission fees to the Protectorates and their islands and reefs, and fines incurred by violators of the laws. These haven't been enough so far to increase the number of rangers and their equipment. The boats keep on going there.

Perhaps us visitors of that area of the Red Sea can give a little help by simply avoiding joining any trips to Shab Samadai for the time being.

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