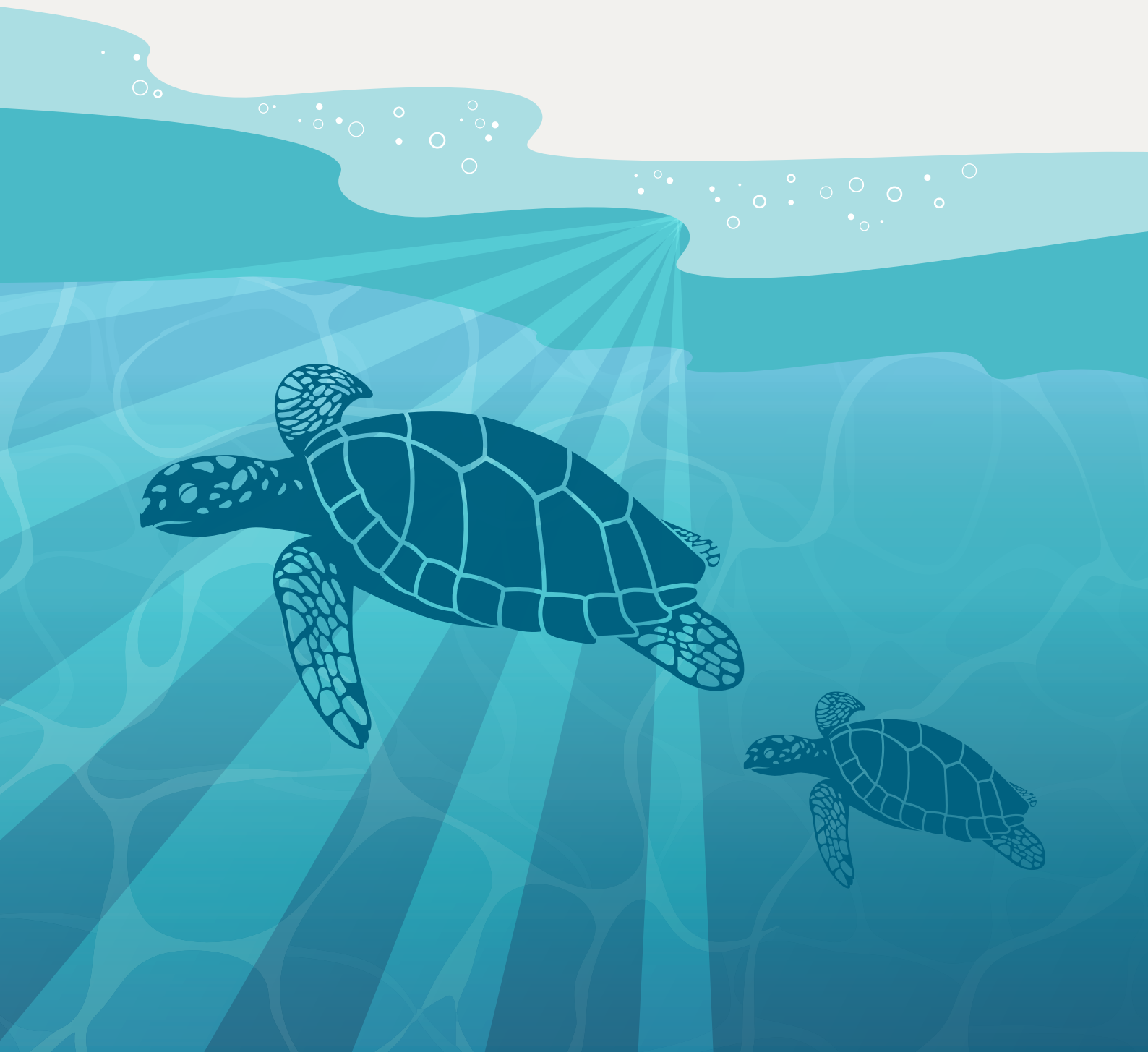
Code of conduct
for tourism operators interacting with sea turtles



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Code of conduct for tourism operators interacting with sea turtles

Sea turtles are one of the most exciting animals to see in the wild, and Vanuatu's waters are home to four of the seven species found worldwide: Hawksbill, Green, Loggerhead and Leatherback. Hawksbill, Green and Leatherback turtles also come ashore to lay their eggs on Vanuatu's beaches during the summer months (October to March). Loggerheads are occasional visitors. This gives tourists and locals alike ample opportunities to encounter turtles. With clear warm water around our coasts the environment is conducive to turtle watching activities.

With more and more people travelling on holidays in tropical locations like Vanuatu there is more opportunity for turtle-based tourism activities, however the increased human interactions with turtles are not without impact. All species of sea turtle are threatened with extinction; therefore it is important that our tourism activities do not further threaten these iconic species.

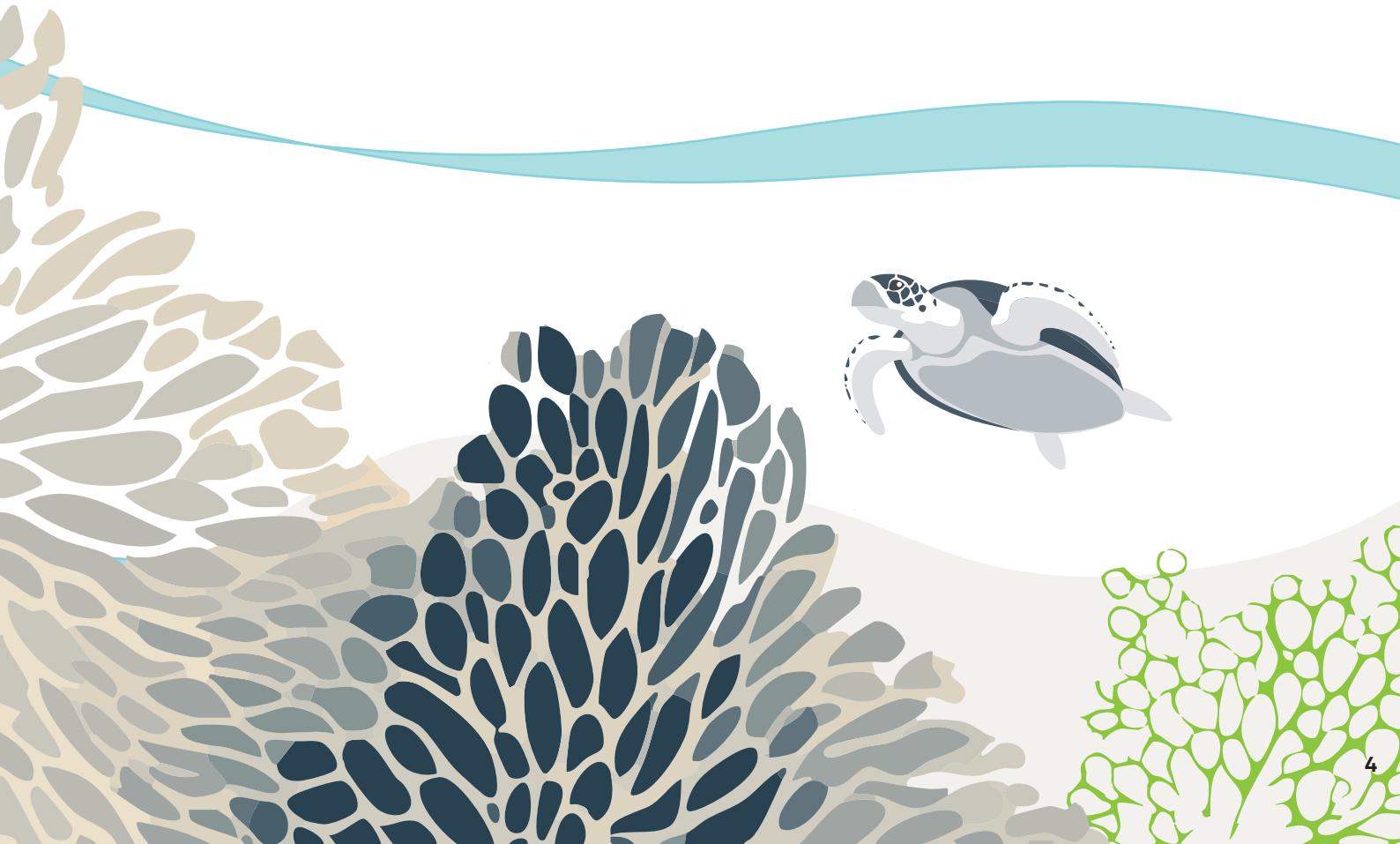
The "Guideline for Interacting with Sea Turtles in Vanuatu" aims to give anyone encountering sea turtles the knowledge to ensure that their interactions with turtles do not harm them and they remain happy and healthy and survive into the future. Tourism operators have a duty of care to our visiting tourists to ensure they remain safe. There is also a burden of responsibility to use the natural resources that tourism relies on sustainably with minimum impact from the tourism activity. Disturbance and stress to turtles are easy to cause and can have serious consequences including changed behaviours such as feeding, resting, mating and nesting. The disruption of these behaviours can negatively affect the conservation status of turtles.

The Code of conduct for Tourism Operators Interacting with Sea Turtles is not just for tourism businesses with tours specifically for viewing turtles, but for any tour where tourists may come across turtles during tours such as diving, snorkelling, kayaking, boating, using stand up paddleboards, jet skis, walking on nesting beaches etc. It is relevant to any service provider that has tours on or under the sea anywhere in Vanuatu. It is also for any tourism properties on the coast where turtles sometimes come close to shore, nest, or for operators who transport tourists across these areas, including water taxis.

The "Guidelines for Interacting with Turtles in Vanuatu" forms the basis of this code of conduct. As a tourism operator you have additional responsibilities to ensure your staff and your tourists adhere to the guidelines so both turtles and people stay safe.

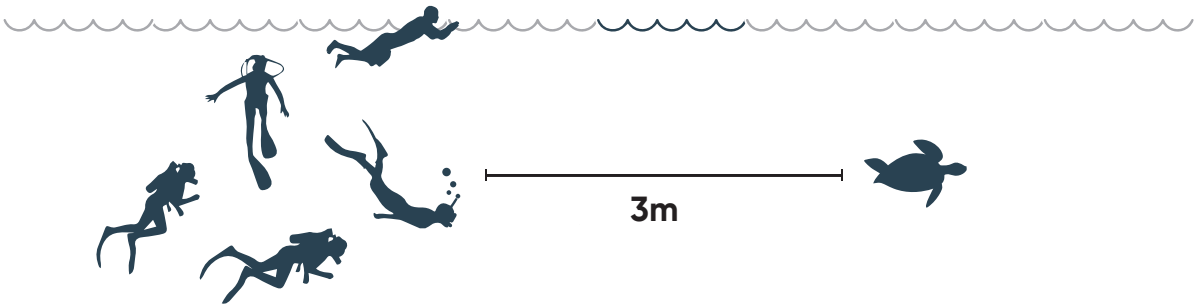
General guidance

- You should display or provide the "Guidelines for Interacting with Turtles in Vanuatu" to all customers.
- It is your responsibility to ensure that all the tourists adhere to these guidelines. This includes not only tourists on vessels or in-water tours, but tourists who see turtles from your property and enter the water from your property unguided.
- You should brief tourists on the guidelines before any tours (guided or unguided) or before they enter the water or nesting beach.
- The briefing should include recognised signals (verbal or signed) for when someone sees a turtle and for instructions that are given to tourists to make sure turtles are not disturbed and the tourists stay safe. Make sure all crew and guides know the signal for seeing a turtle and the instructions.
- Ensure that all your staff know the guidelines and adhere to them. Check this regularly and train new staff as they enter employment.
- If the purpose of your tour is viewing or watching turtles, you should hold a permit from the department of tourism for this activity and ensure all staff are trained in how to follow the guidelines.
- Limit viewing time of each turtle to a maximum of half an hour whether in water or from a vessel. The impacts and stress from human and vessel interactions increase the longer they are exposed to stressful encounters.
- When tourists have encounters with turtles, they often want to have photos or footage to remind them of their amazing experience. Please make sure that when they are taking photos or filming the turtle they don't forget about the guideline and get too close or annoy the turtle when trying to get the perfect "selfie" or TikTok video. This is also for the safety of the tourists.

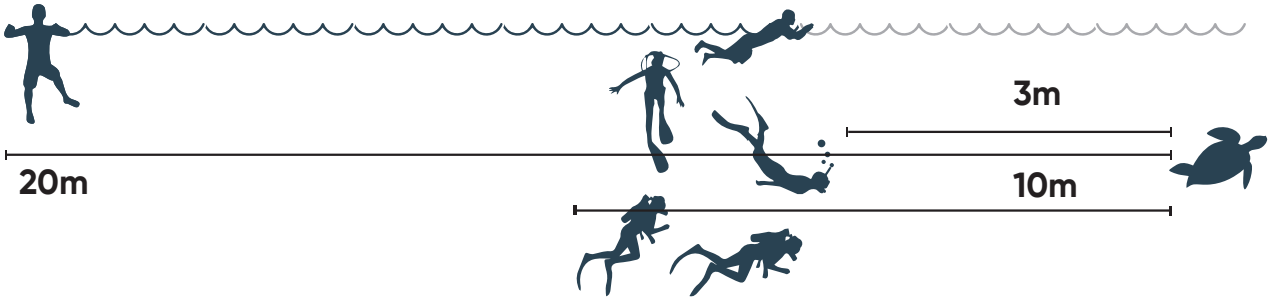


In-water activities – swimming, snorkeling or diving.

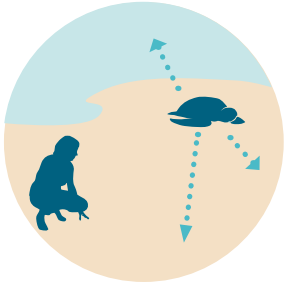
- Know the guidelines for in-water activities and ensure all staff do too.
- Instruct your tourists to not swim towards turtles. We don't want to chase away our turtles. If they become afraid of people because of the interactions they have with them, they might not come back to places where we can see them. If a turtle feels safe it will continue its normal behaviours, allowing your tourists to have the best possible experience with them.
- On tours there should always be a trained guide in the water whenever there are tourists in the water with turtles.
- Stay at last 3 meters away from turtles. 3 metres is about 2 human body lengths.
- There should be no more than 4 tourists and one guide within 10 metres of a turtle.



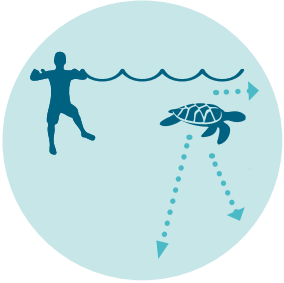
- If you come across a turtle and there are already 5 people within 10 metres, stay back, at least 20 metres away.



- Turtles should not be surrounded by people without an obvious escape route. Make sure your tourists abide by this guideline.



- If a turtle shows any signs of distress or disturbance (such as repeatedly swimming away from the people) make sure the tourists do not chase it and allow it to swim away if it wants to.

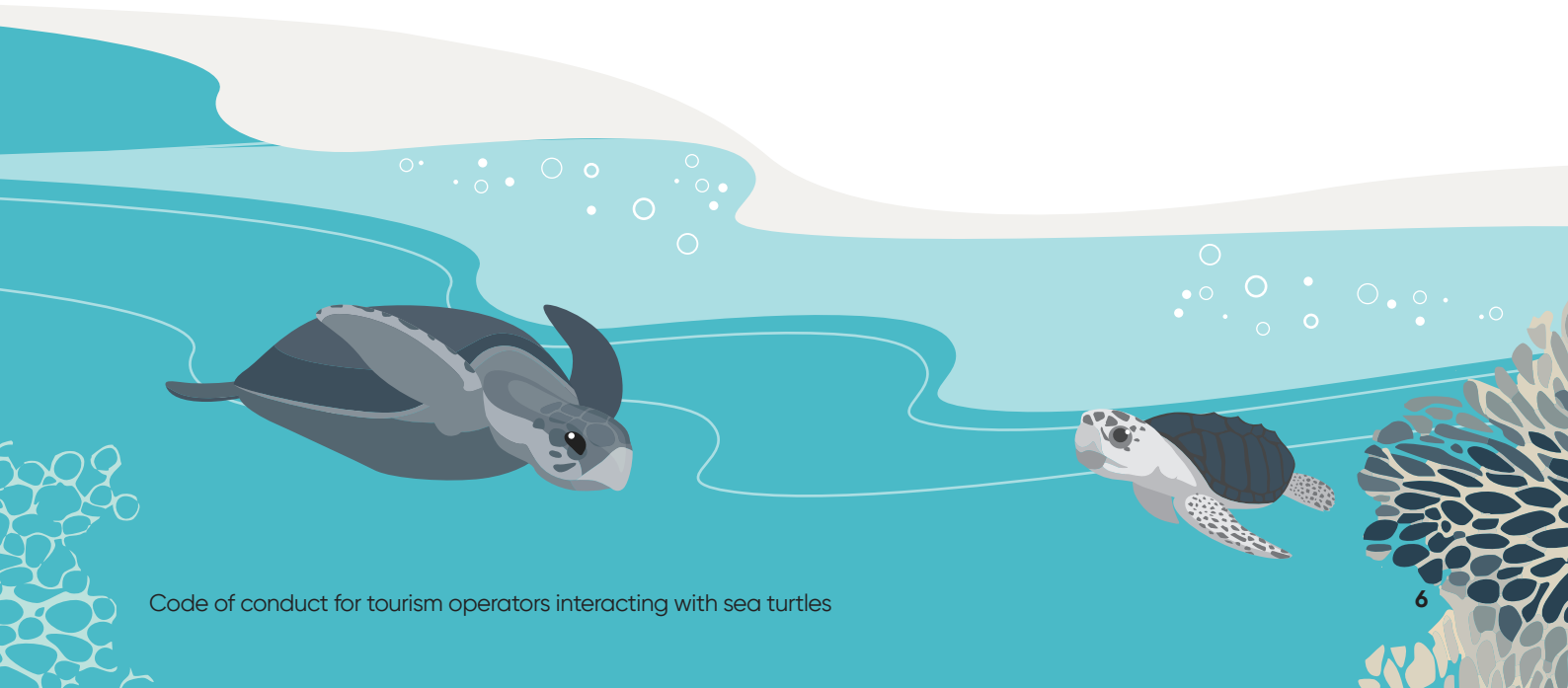


- Tell your tourists not to touch or try to feed turtles.

Nesting beach tours

- Give a briefing to your customers before they visit the nesting beach, on how to behave when a turtle is present and ensure all the customers are familiar with the "Guidelines for Interacting with Turtles", particularly the nesting turtle watching protocol. Remember it is your responsibility to ensure that all the tourists adhere to these guidelines.
- Visitors to Vanuatu usually do not know the best way to interact safely with our wildlife. By educating them on the guidelines, and providing other information about our sea turtles, you can ensure that both the tourists and the turtles have the best experience they can. It is very important that nesting female turtles are undisturbed as they come onto the beach and lay their eggs so we can continue to have a healthy turtle population into the future.
- Keep viewing groups small, ideally no more than five tourists per guide. This will limit the possible disturbance to turtles attempting to lay. It is easier to manage a smaller group and make sure everyone adheres to the guideline.

- Consider sending only one guide onto the beach to scout for nesters first and only bring the tourists when one has started her crawl. Female turtles can be deterred from coming onto a nesting beach if there are people on the beach.
- Get to know the habits of the turtles and how they behave on your beach and the likelihood of seeing turtles on any particular night. Then manage the expectations of your guests so they are not unhappy if they do not see a turtle on the night they visit.
- Limit nest viewing hours on nesting beaches to three hours after sunset only. Some female turtles may still be deterred from nesting even if guides and tourists follow all the guidelines correctly. By limiting time spent on the beach looking for nesting turtles, some females who may have been deterred early in the evening will have an opportunity to nest later in the night without fear of people.



Viewing hatch emergence

- Give a brief to your customers before they visit the nesting beach, on how to behave when turtle hatchlings emerge and ensure all the customers are familiar with the "Guideline for Interacting with Turtles", particularly the hatchling watching protocol. Remember it is your responsibility to ensure that all the tourists adhere to these guidelines. It is very important that hatchlings are able to reach the ocean undisturbed to give them the best chance of surviving to adulthood, and so we can continue to have a healthy turtle population into the future.
- If you see a hatchling that has become stuck and/or has run in the wrong direction and you believe it will not be able to make it to the sea on its own; as a guide you can carefully and quickly move the hatchling either out of a stuck/trapped position, or to a dark place on the beach where it can reorient itself and find the ocean. Give the turtle time to try and find its own way first; do not be too quick to interfere. It is better to try to block the light pollution / move the obstruction than to pick up the hatchling. Think very carefully before interfering with a hatchling in any way. If you truly believe it is stuck or running in the wrong direction and will not be able to reach the sea, you have to decide if it needs assistance, and then move it with the minimum amount of disturbance.
- Do not handle the hatchlings under any other circumstances. Never pick up a hatchling to show the tourists.
- Do not allow tourists to handle any hatchlings. Even in a scenario where you are required to quickly move a hatchling from where it would certainly not reach the sea, it is only appropriate for a guide to move the hatchling.
- Make sure you and your tourists do not use bright torches or other artificial light. If you absolutely must use a torch, only use a low, red filtered light. It is a good idea if you have tours that go and see the nesting or hatchlings emerging regularly you could think about buying torches with red filters to hire to your customers or let your tourists use. But keep the torchlight to a minimum.
- Do not keep hatchlings in captivity, short or long term. Even if they look like they are weak or sick. Hatchlings need to make the crawl down the beach and enter a frenzied swim to deep pelagic waters with energy from yolk supply. Preventing them from doing this weakens them making it harder for them to reach safer waters and affects the imprinting on the beach so they may not be able to find their way "home" to mate and lay their eggs when they are mature enough to breed.

Viewing turtles from the air

- If you are flying a fixed-wing aircraft or a helicopter, you should fly at a minimum 300 metres above turtles. Disturbance from aircrafts by excess wind, noise and shadows can cause stress to marine wildlife, and/or alter their behaviour as they move to avoid these effects.
- If you are flying a helicopter do not hover over them. Hovering over turtles can cause increased wind, noise and shadow disturbance for an extended period. If disturbed, they will most likely move away and stop their current behaviour e.g. feeding.
- If you are flying a drone, you should fly at a minimum of 20 metres above any turtles.

Hotels, resorts and bungalows close to turtle nesting beaches and foraging habitat

- A full Environmental Impact Assessment should be completed for any new tourism developments on the coast to establish if the site is important turtle habitat or has nesting beaches. The EIA should include impacts on turtles or their habitat and provide means to eliminate or mitigate any harm to turtles. If necessary, a turtle expert should be consulted to assess turtle-specific impacts.
- Any proposed new construction, including sea walls and jetties on existing premises, in coast areas should consider the potential impact on turtles and turtle habitat.
- Ensure all necessary permits are in place before any construction begins such as an Environmental Permit and a Foreshore Development Permit. Abide by any conditions stipulated in the permit.
- If turtles come across upright structures they are less likely to lay their eggs than if they come across more natural sea defences such as dunes and vegetation. Consider this when planning any sea defences.
- Light pollution is a significant issue on nesting beaches. Consider this carefully when planning buildings, including the cumulative effect of light from multiple premises.
- Follow the guidelines for keeping beaches turtle friendly.
- Consider putting up signs consisting of the guidelines near the beach or sea turtle habitat.

Turtle tourism and culture

Including Ni-Vanuatu culture in a turtle tourism experience can add value to the tour. It is important to consult with local leaders or artisans to ensure it is appropriate to include that cultural activity in the tour and that permission has been granted to engage in the cultural activity. Ensure that any credits or royalties are given to the appropriate persons including for artwork, handicrafts or stories inspired by turtles, that are sold on the premises or on tours.

Conservation in Turtle Tourism in Vanuatu

Tourism can aid turtle conservation or add to the harm. Many tourists want to get involved with turtle conservation efforts and some will even pay to do so. To ensure good conservation outcomes, and to ensure animal welfare is not compromised, consideration of the design of the conservation initiative should occur before the development of a tourism product. Any conservation project should be in collaboration with conservation NGOs or turtle experts. This is especially true when the research or conservation activity involves catching or handling turtles. The ethics of engaging in these activities need to be considered by appropriately qualified persons. Permits are required for these activities from the Vanuatu government.

Inappropriate tourism involving turtles

Catching turtles for viewing by tourists: Catching turtles is stressful for the turtle, as is holding it whether for a few seconds or for longer. It is never OK to catch a turtle for a tourist to have a closer encounter with the turtle. It is against the law to harass turtles or to hold them for even a short period of time.

Keeping turtles in captivity or restricting their movement is not an appropriate tourism product. It causes stress to the turtle, impacts on their welfare and can prevent normal behaviours and reproduction. All turtle species are threatened with extinction and harming or stressing turtles can have an impact on the whole population. It is against the law to hold turtles in captivity in Vanuatu.

Head starting (the process of raising turtle hatchlings to a size at which they are thought to be less vulnerable to predators usually at ~ 12 months old, then releasing them into the wild). There is a significant body of evidence in the scientific literature and from expert opinion that head starting hatching turtles has serious welfare implications and can cause maladapted behaviours after release. This coupled with the lack of evidence that head starting increases the breeding populations at significantly higher rates than in wild conditions, means there is no justification for removing hatchlings of a threatened species from the wild population. Other methods of protecting turtle populations have been found to be effective. Therefore, head starting is not an appropriate tourism product.

Rehabilitation of sick or injured turtles should only be under the supervision of an experienced wildlife veterinarian. Displaying sick and injured animals to the public increases the level of stress and reduces the capacity of the turtle to heal and is not an appropriate tourism product. In countries where they have properly resourced and experienced rehabilitation centres for turtles, some turtles at the end of their recovery journey can be seen by visitors under strict conditions. However, no such rehabilitation facility exists in Vanuatu. Remember it is against the law to hold any turtle in captivity including if it is sick or injured. If you find a sick or injured turtle, inform the Vanuatu Fisheries Department.

Turtles are protected by Vanuatu laws:

Sea turtle species in Vanuatu are protected under the Fisheries Act (2014). Regulation 59 prohibits the harming, killing, consuming, selling, purchasing, exporting or destroying of any turtle species, as hatchlings, juveniles or adults. It also prohibits the taking, holding, selling, purchasing or exporting of sea turtle shell. It prohibits the interference with or disturbance of turtle nests or nesting turtles, and the taking of and consumption of turtle eggs. It also makes it illegal to hold turtles in captivity in any way. There is provision for the Director to grant an exemption on the grounds of custom, education and/or research.

A person who breaks this law faces a fine of up VT200,000. If a company breaks this law the penalty is a fine of up to Vt1,000,000.

If a turtle is accidently injured or killed you must report it immediately to the Vanuatu Fisheries Department. Call +678 23119 or +678 7748499 (Port Vila office) or 36218 (Espiritu Santo office) or email the research team on fisheriesresearch@fisheries.gov.vu or the compliance team at fisheriescompliance@fisheries.gov.vu. The general contact for the Vanuatu fisheries Department is contact@fisheries.gov.vu.

If you see a sick, injured or dead turtle please also report this to the Vanuatu Fisheries Department or the Vanuatu Environmental Science Society by emailing vess@vanuatuconservation.org, or Wan Smol Bag's Vanua Tai coordinator, Donald James on 7772613 / 5419965.

If you have a turtle watching tour you are required to have a tourism permit for this activity. If you witness a tour operator who is not abiding by these guidelines you can contact the Department of Tourism on +678 33400 and ask for the officer for minimum standards.

If all tourism operators in Vanuatu follow this Code of Conduct for Tourism Operators Interacting with Sea Turtles, this will ensure our iconic wild turtles will continue to be happy, healthy and attract tourists to our country into the future. Following these guidelines will ensure the encounters tourists have with turtles will be a better experience for both the tourist and the turtles. You can enhance this experience further by ensuring you and your staff know about turtles, particularly about their biology, life cycle, threats and the conservation measures we can take to protect them. You can then include this information on your tours or display it to your guests to give the tourists a better experience and increase awareness about these magnificent creatures, not only in Vanuatu but around the world.

Appendix

Useful turtle tourism resources and examples of sustainable and successful turtle tourism products.

Online education and courses:
Olive Ridley Turtle project offers free online course on general information about sea turtles and on the science and conservation of sea turtles. https://oliveridleyproject.org/e-learning

See Turtle is an American organisation that connects people with turtles. It has educational resources and coordinates World Sea Turtle Day events. https://www.seeturtles.org/sea-turtle-education

Use this QR code to see the full guidelines on the Vanuatu Environmental Science Society's website.

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