

# SANDBAR STINGRAY REPORT

## APRIL 4<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> 2020

### BACKGROUND

In the immediate aftermath of the closing of international borders and the implementation of the Shelter in Place Regulations and subsequent island wide marine lock down following the COVID-19 global pandemic considerable public interest and concern has arisen with respect to safeguarding stingray tourism attraction at the Sandbar. Concerns have been expressed that without ongoing and regular supplemental feeding and human interaction the rays will lose their site fidelity and learned human interaction abilities, essentially reverting to wild rays and potentially leading to the loss of the Sandbar attraction. While the DoE believes that the rays' learned behaviour will not be eroded in the short-term, out of an abundance of caution the DoE has committed to continue to reinforce the rays' association between boats/humans and food with a regular feeding schedule in place utilising departmental boats and suitable food the DoE has on hand until marine curfew restrictions are relaxed.

Given the current curfew restrictions and the total 'on water curfew' that exists the DoE believes this is in keeping with the government's goal of restricting all nonessential activities to reduce the risk of COVID-19 community transmission, and minimising the need for police checks on public activities.

The last known organized feeding event prior to the DoE taking on responsibility following the revocation of the private exemptions was on 31st March 2020.

### DAILY FEEDING AND MONITORING REPORT:

1. Between Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> April 2020 and Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020 – between 10 – 11 AM. The DOE team fed approximately 5 – 10 lbs of prepared food to rays present at the Sand Bar each day.
2. A standardized protocol was adopted:
  - a. The DoE vessel approached from the south and circled the Sand Bar and then proceeded to the reef crest traveling west for 400 meters and then returned to the Sand Bar to anchor in the centre with the engine running in neutral.
  - b. The Number of Rays present was immediately recorded.



- c. Prepared food was distributed for 10 minutes and then the number of rays present was recorded.
- d. Food was distributed for an additional 20 minutes if available and rays were counted again and a 360 degree video record was collected using a GoPro or cell phone.
- e. In water feeding activity was then conducted for approximately 10 minutes of constant stingray/human contact.
- f. A final stingray count was conducted prior to departure.

3. A summary of recorded ray presence is provided:

	Sat 4 <sup>th</sup> April	Sun 5 <sup>th</sup> April	Mon 6 <sup>th</sup> April	Tues 7 <sup>th</sup> April	Wed 8 <sup>th</sup> April
Rays present on Sand Bar at arrival	1	1	2	3	2
Rays present after 10 minutes of feeding	6	18	10	11	14
Rays present after 30 minutes of feeding	12	21	16	14	18
Total rays present upon departure	16	25	16	14	20

**OBSERVATIONS:**

- 4. 10lbs of food seems adequate to attract nearby stingrays but rays will continue to feed and fish and birds will also join in.



- 5. Different rays appear on different days – distinguishing marks on certain stingrays allow for individual visual identification.
- 6. Rays are still strongly drawn to boat traffic. On occasions when a second DoE boat was present stingrays would leave the feeding boat to investigate the newcomer, just as they would under normal tourism conditions.