

Voluntary Standard for Environmentally Sustainable SCUBA Diving Practices in Hawaii

Introduction

Purpose:

The purpose of this standard is to specify SCUBA diving practices that will enhance the diving experience while minimizing the impacts on marine ecosystems in Hawaii state waters, with particular emphasis on coral reef habitats and the species that depend on them for survival.

Scope:

This voluntary standard specifies requirements for marine recreation providers of recreational SCUBA diving operations in Hawaii. The standard does not include safety-related rules and regulations. It is not a summary of legal rules and/or regulations applicable to SCUBA divers or operators. In addition, environmental practices do not have priority over safety.

Definitions

Coral reef conservation

The act of minimizing damage to coral reef habitats.

Coral reef ecology

The study of organisms and their relationship to the coral reef environment.

Dive leader

A person who has sufficient knowledge, skill and experience to plan, organize, supervise and lead dives to known sites within the region; possesses personal rescue and rescue management skills, and holds proper credentials to engage in such activities.

Environmental briefing

Organized oral discussion led by dive leaders or staff members to educate divers on site specific coral reef ecosystems with a focus on marine life that may be encountered on a dive including endemic, threatened and/or endangered species and the fragility of the reef and its inhabitants in general; and ways and reasons for each diver to minimize impact while diving.

Guided scuba diving

Organized scuba diving where clients are accompanied by a dive leader appointed by the marine recreation provider.

Marine Managed Area (MMA)

Any area of the marine environment established by law or regulation to protect or enhance part or all of the natural and cultural resources therein.

Marine recreation provider (MRP)

Entity (business, individual or organization), including any individual acting on behalf of such entity in a professional capacity, which offers one or more of the following services:

- a. Training, education or information sharing on scuba diving services;
- b. Guided diving excursions;
- c. Rental of recreational scuba diving equipment;
- d. Environmental education prior to or during guided dive excursions.

Protected species harassment

Any act of pursuit, torment or annoyance which (i) has the potential to injure a marine protected species; or (ii) has the potential to disturb a marine protected species by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, resting or sheltering.

Recreational scuba diving

Any underwater recreational activity which utilizes open or closed-circuit breathing apparatus.

Respectful encounter

Relating with a marine organism in a way that shows concern for its well-being and which is not harmful to it.

Environmentally Sustainable Practices for:

Marine recreation providers

1. Marine Recreation Providers shall require that their employees and contractors comply with the rules, regulations and laws that apply in the area and adhere to the environmentally sustainable practices specified in this standard.

2. Recreational SCUBA diving trips shall not be made to sites that are prohibited by federal or state authorities. Protected species shall not be harassed. Sightings of the critically endangered Hawaiian Monk Seal shall be reported to the 24 hr NOAA hotline (888) 256-9840. Operators shall use the recommended minimum viewing distance of 50 yards to avoid disturbing monk seals.

3a. Marine recreation providers shall ensure that all staff with responsibilities on board boats or in the water have received in-house training in basic, Hawaii focused coral reef ecology and conservation, including information on MMA rules and on threatened, endangered and endemic/rare species that may be encountered in the area. If in-house training is not available training can be sought through local educational organizations. After training, dive leaders shall be able to provide information on threatened, endangered and endemic/rare species in that region and to properly instruct divers in environmentally sustainable diving practices.

3b. An annual all-hands meeting shall be held to:

- Reinforce understanding of the organization's environmental policies.

- Stay current with new developments.

- Exchange experiences and information among staff.

- Address topics that warrant improvement within the operation or at the industry level.

4. Marine recreation providers renting diving equipment for other than guided scuba diving shall have posted in a prominent location the Diver's Pledge, and shall direct renters' attention to it during the rental process.

5. Marine recreation providers shall cooperate with other recreation providers, associations, and other responsible agencies to:

- Promote installation of permanent buoyed moorings at dive sites.

- Maintain mooring buoys.

- Report damaged moorings and those needing replacement to the responsible agency (DLNR or whoever is responsible on each individual island. Communicate with other vessel operators to locate and share moorings.

MRP Boat Diving Activities

1. Guided dives offered by the MRP shall be under the supervision of a dive leader. Unguided dives shall be conducted only when certified divers have shown that they can and will adhere to the Diver's Pledge.
2. A guided SCUBA diving group shall not exceed 8 divers per dive guide. When a group consists of more than 8 divers, additional staff (divemaster in training or above) shall assist with ensuring environmentally sustainable practices.
3. Oral, pre-dive environmental briefings shall be given prior to the first dive of each excursion and shall reference the Environmentally Sustainable Practices for Divers and Dive Leaders. Briefings may be enhanced by use of a whiteboard, video, handouts, or other educational materials, but these aids are not substitutes for oral briefings. If circumstances do not allow for an oral briefing, MRPs shall have clients review the Diver's Pledge.
4. Operation of dive boats shall be in accordance with U.S. Coast Guard Federal Environmental Regulations and State of Hawaii DLNR laws.
5. MRPs shall use moorings where available. Operators may refer to their regional mooring reference booklet for guidelines on mooring locations and usage. A database of the State of Hawaii moorings and their repair status is online at: www.Hawaiianscuba.com. Proper use of moorings shall consist of using a boat line to attach to the pick-up line (never attaching the pick-up line directly to the vessel) and always adding enough scope to minimize stress on the mooring.
6. When moorings are not available and when live boat (unmoored) diving is not feasible, captains shall anchor only in sand. Since it is illegal under state law to damage coral, care shall be taken to ensure that no damage to coral occurs in the process. This may be accomplished by one or more of the following:

Precise use of GPS coordinates or line-ups.

Visual guidance by crewmembers to large sand areas when visibility makes this feasible

Having a crew member get in the water to provide visual guidance so that the anchor and chain are properly placed in sand

If none of the above is feasible then an in-water assessment shall be performed by a crewmember immediately after anchoring so that the anchor and/or chain can be moved, if needed, before the dive activity begins. Necessary adjustments shall be made by the boat captain during the entire anchorage period to ensure that damage to coral does not occur through dragging anchor or changes in wind direction.

7. Environmentally unsustainable practices by MPR's such as anchor damage or short scoping on moorings shall be brought to the attention of that vessel's captain right away. If a good resolution is not achieved and/or it occurs repeatedly, the vessel's management/owner shall be contacted. If necessary, violations of state or federal laws can be reported to the Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement (Statewide 24-hr hotline: 643-3567).

8. Water entry points and descent lines from boats shall lie over sand or rubble, not coral, or in water of sufficient depth that divers can make adjustments and become neutrally buoyant before approaching the reef in order to prevent contact with corals and other marine life. Weighted descent lines shall be kept a minimum of 10 feet off the bottom and above all protruding formations, including coral and rock. When diving from shore, entry and exit routes shall be used that avoid walking on coral.

9. MRPs and their staff shall demonstrate stewardship and role modeling both above and below the water in areas that they visit by practicing environmentally sustainable behavior and by monitoring divers' environmentally sustainable practices as well. If environmentally unsustainable practices are observed or discovered, staff members shall address them – in the water or on board – by educating the divers on why and how to adjust their behavior. This information is to be shared in a supportive and educational manner. Other actions may include: keeping the divers (or group) in a less fragile or sensitive area (such as sand); choosing a second site that is less fragile; suggesting leaving a diver's camera onboard in order to practice better buoyancy control; or suggesting further buoyancy practice or training.

10. MRPs shall not sell fish food, promote fish feeding, or participate in feeding fish, including discarding food overboard.

Dive leaders

Dive leaders shall:

1. Follow all items in the Environmentally Sustainable Practices for Divers and Dive Leaders.
2. Provide a pre-dive briefing which, depending on the experience-level and needs of the divers, may include the following:
 - a. a description of the environmental and physical features of the dive site.
 - b. a description of the protected species, State and Federal laws and MMA rules that apply to the area.
 - c. techniques (i.e. buoyancy control) to minimize impact specific to the marine environment in which the diving activity is to be carried out, such as sandy bottoms, coral reef, etc.
 - d. advice to photographers that the health of corals and marine life takes precedence over any photography activity.
 - e. an overview of the Environmentally Sustainable Practices for Divers and Dive Leaders not listed above.
3. Take appropriate action necessary to safeguard protected species in the event that divers cannot or do not comply with the rules, regulations, or laws that apply in the area and the Environmentally Sustainable Practices for Divers and Dive Leaders specified in this standard.

Divers and Dive Leaders

Divers and dive leaders shall:

1. Follow all applicable State and Federal laws and rules related to marine life and protected areas.
2. Be respectful toward all marine life, including never chasing, harassing, flushing from shelter or re-locating marine life.
3. Maintain an awareness of fins, equipment and cameras; adjust buoyancy and secure equipment to avoid touching, kicking, standing or resting on corals and to minimize stirring up sand.
4. Not handle marine life except on rare occasions, and then only with respect and for educational purposes, never for entertainment. Handling shall be limited to hardy shelled or armored invertebrates that are not on or laying eggs or otherwise involved in reproductive activities, and these organisms shall be replaced in the exact spot from which they were taken.
5. Not feed fish or any other marine life; move a predator or its prey, or discard food overboard with the intent to feed marine life.
6. Keep a respectful distance from turtles so that they are not prompted to get up and leave when resting or to change course when swimming. Never chase them, block their path or try to ride them.
7. Secure dive flags to the sandy bottom using weights or other anchoring device or tie off to non-living surfaces (never to living coral).
8. Be extra careful if taking photos or videos, being aware of the reef and respectful of the marine life.
9. Look before touching the bottom for balance, making sure it is non-living substrate and when absolutely necessary using only one or two fingers for contact.
10. Minimize glove use unless required by a medical condition, for thermal protection, or for safety (for instance, when conducting reef cleanups or when maintaining contact with fixed ascent lines that are colonized by sharp marine life).

DIVER'S PLEDGE

To ensure that the reefs I dive on continue to thrive, I pledge to:

- 1. Follow all applicable State and Federal laws related to marine life and protected areas.**
- 2. Be respectful to all marine life.**
- 3. Make every effort to not touch, stand, kick, or rest on corals.**
- 4. Never chase, harass, flush from shelter or relocate marine life.**
- 5. Not feed fish or other marine life.**
- 6. Keep a respectful distance from turtles and never chase them, block their path or try to ride them.**
- 7. Secure dive flags to the sandy bottom using weights or other anchoring device or tie off to non-living surfaces.**
- 8. Be extra careful if taking photos or videos, being aware of the reef and respectful of the marine life.**
- 9. Look before touching the bottom for balance, making sure it is non-living substrate and when absolutely necessary using only one or two fingers for contact.**
- 10. Minimize glove use unless required by a medical condition, for thermal protection, or for safety.**