

Ocean Country Partnership Programme



Protected, Endangered, and Threatened (PET) Mobile Marine Species in Sri Lanka Community Workshops Report

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Ocean Country Partnership Programme:

The Ocean Country Partnership Programme (OCP) is a bilateral technical assistance and capacity building programme that provides tailored support to countries to manage the marine environment more sustainably, including by strengthening marine science expertise, developing science-based policy and management tools and creating educational resources for coastal communities. The OCP delivers work under three thematic areas: biodiversity, marine pollution, and sustainable seafood.

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Executive Summary

The Ocean Country Partnership Programme (OCP), funded by the UK's Blue Planet Fund and administered by Defra, partnered with Oceanswell to conduct marine conservation workshops in Trincomalee, Negombo, and Colombo in Sri Lanka. Between 17th February and 4th March 2025, we successfully conducted six community-focused workshops, five of which were delivered within a concentrated three-day period from 17th to 19th February. This intensive rollout enabled us to engage a total of 474 participants across three coastal regions. Highlighting our capacity to efficiently mobilize resources, achieve wide outreach in a short timeframe, and ensure strong representation across age groups with particular emphasis on school-aged boys and adult women. These workshops aimed to raise awareness among coastal communities and students about the conservation of Protected, Endangered, and Threatened (PET) mobile marine species, including marine mammals, sea turtles, and seabirds. Through educational presentations and discussions in Sinhala, participants gained insights into marine biodiversity, conservation laws, and the ecological importance of PET marine species. The sessions also encouraged the exchange of traditional knowledge, highlighting historical data gaps and the challenges faced in marine species conservation. Many attendees, particularly fishermen and students from fishing families, expressed a newfound commitment to conservation after learning about the threats to marine life and the legal frameworks in place to protect them, delivered by the experts.

The workshops revealed key conservation challenges, including species population declines, traditional hunting practices, illegal fishing, and the lack of proper reporting mechanisms for stranded or entangled marine animals. Fishermen reported frequent turtle and dolphin entanglements, while a significant knowledge gap was identified regarding seabirds and the long-term ecological impacts of human activities. The sessions emphasized the need for continued education, stricter policy enforcement, and improved reporting systems to strengthen conservation efforts. By fostering collaboration between local communities and scientific initiatives, the programme underscored the importance of bridging traditional knowledge with conservation science to ensure the long-term protection of Sri Lanka's marine ecosystems.

1. Introduction

Oceanswell is Sri Lanka's first non-profit organisation dedicated to marine conservation research and education. The organisation plays a crucial role in conducting vital research to enhance marine conservation efforts across Sri Lanka while providing hands-on learning opportunities for students. Through traditional and social media, Oceanswell educates and inspires future ocean advocates, fostering a deeper public understanding of marine ecosystems and encouraging greater community engagement in ocean conservation.

Between 17th February and 4th March 2025, we conducted six high-impact workshops across three coastal locations, reaching a total of 474 participants in an impressively short time. Remarkably, five of these workshops were held within just three consecutive days from 17th to 19th February showcasing the strength, coordination, and commitment of our team. The sixth and final workshop was held on 4th March. The workshops catered to a wide demographic: four sessions targeted school children aged from 6 to 16 years, and two focused on adults aged from 18 to 60 years from coastal communities. A total of 406 school boys, 30 school girls, 28 adult females, and 10 adult males participated a clear reflection of our focus on inclusive engagement across age and gender.

One of the key initiatives supporting these efforts is the Ocean Country Partnership Programme (OCP), established under the UK government's Blue Planet Fund (BPF) and administered by the UK Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The OCP is a bilateral technical assistance and capacity-building programme designed to support countries in managing their marine environments more sustainably. It strengthens marine science expertise, develops evidence-based policies and management tools, and creates educational resources for coastal communities. The programme operates under three main thematic areas: biodiversity conservation, marine pollution management, and the promotion of sustainable seafood practices.

In conservation terminology, PET refers to Protected, Endangered, and Threatened species, which denote the legal protection and conservation status of species at risk. Protected species are those legally safeguarded, making it illegal to kill, injure, capture, or harm them. Endangered species face a high risk of extinction due to rapid population decline or habitat loss. Threatened species are those likely to become endangered within a predictable period or a significant portion of their range. Sri Lanka is home to several marine species that fall under these PET categories, highlighting the need for urgent conservation efforts. The OCP project in Sri Lanka focuses on the conservation and management of these PET mobile marine species, including marine mammals, sea turtles, and seabirds.

2. Objectives

This OCP funded project aims to:

- Provide technical advice for the conservation and management of PET mobile marine species in Sri Lanka.
- Strengthen capacity-building initiatives to enhance marine conservation efforts.
- Provide fundamental knowledge regarding PET species to the coastal communities, and students in the region.

3. Methods

3.1. Outline Document Preparation

The workshop focuses on the country's PET mobile marine species, specifically marine mammals, sea turtles, and seabirds. Accordingly, an outline document was prepared to gather comprehensive information on these three groups, covering:

- Anatomy and adaptations
- Classification and distribution in Sri Lanka
- Identification characteristics
- Life-history characteristics
- Ecological importance
- Threats
- Laws and conventions for their protection.

3.2. PowerPoint Presentation Preparation and Translation (Sinhala) for the Workshops

Using the outline document, a PowerPoint presentation was developed for the workshop and translated into the local language (Sinhala). Presentation topics included:

- Introduction to Marine Mammals, Sea Turtles, and Seabirds
- Adaptations for Ocean Life
- Species Diversity and Distribution in Sri Lankan Waters
- Ecological Significance
- Threats Facing These Species
- Conservation and Protective Measures
- Legal Frameworks and Protection.

3.3. Conducting Workshops

Workshops were conducted for both adults and school children in two coastal communities: the first in Trincomalee and the second in Negombo. Each adult workshop lasted two hours, with one hour dedicated to a presentation and another hour for open discussion. The schoolchildren's sessions ran for one and a half hours, including a one-hour presentation followed by 30 minutes of interactive activities. Adult participants were invited to engage and attend through key community contacts involved with local coastal community societies, ensuring strong engagement and trust. School workshops were organised in collaboration with school principals, who were contacted formally through official emails. This targeted approach helped us ensure broad community representation and intentionally prioritized Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) by engaging diverse groups — including women, youth, and older adults — in the workshop planning and participation.

As a bonus, the team also took part in a marine conservation workshop held by Oceanswell at Ananda College, Colombo. The workshop was organised in collaboration with the school's Marine Association.

4. Workshop Reports

4.1. Community Workshops

4.1.1. Workshop 1 – Trincomalee

Date: 2025/02/17

Time: 1.30 p.m. – 3.00 p.m.

Venue: T/TN/ Kanijaweli Sinhala Vidyalaya – Pulmoddai

Target Audience: Pulmoddai, Trincomalee Community

Summary: The workshop had 15 attendees, including 12 females and 3 males. They were fishermen, school teachers, a school principal, and coastal villagers. They were interested in the presentation and actively engaged throughout the session.

Group Discussion: The discussion was conducted for half an hour. During the session, we asked questions from Table 1, and the participants responded well. At the end of the workshop, they shared their valuable feedback with us, which has been transcribed in Table 2.

Table 1. Questions Asked During the Discussion and Participant Responses at Pulmoddai, Trincomalee Community.

No.	Questions	Answers
01	Have you ever seen a dead marine mammal, sea bird or turtle?	Yes. - Dead bodies of sea turtles have been observed. The animals appeared similar to tortoises and were very large. However, since tortoises are not recorded in the ocean, they were identified as turtles. The exact species could not be determined. - Around 20–30 years ago, many turtle species used to reach the Pulmoddai and Kokilai beach areas to lay their eggs. During that time, people would half-boil and eat the eggs, believing they had medicinal properties and were highly nutritious, particularly for treating diseases like "wheezing". - A large number of turtles were observed 20-30 years ago. The area had mineral sand hills, which turtles used for nesting. People would follow the turtles' paths to find and collect their eggs for consumption. - Seagulls and other kite-like birds (Frigate birds) can often be observed when gill nets are being dragged. - One person mentioned that, a long time ago, they had seen a bird with features similar to a Siberian duck. - The Kokilai Lagoon has recorded sightings of various bird species, including terns, during certain periods.

No.	Questions	Answers
02	If yes, when you find the dead animal, what do you do?	• Around 20–30 years ago, one person recalled seeing the dead body of a whale on Pulmoddai Beach. However, he could not identify the species. When asked about its identifying characteristics, he mentioned that by the time it washed ashore, the body had completely decomposed and disintegrated, making identification impossible. • The dead body was burned using large dousers. The remaining middle bone was very large, and witnesses indicated its size using hand gestures, estimating the body to be more than 50 feet long.
03	Do you see them washed up on the beach or entangled in nets?	No
04	Do you often see them?	• Around 20–30 years ago, turtles were often seen during the rainy season.
05	Do you know if you can report this information to authorities? It is very valuable information for us to continue to understand these animals.	• At that time, there were no strict laws or regulations regarding these species, so their presence was not recorded.
06	Do you know where to report any dead animals?	• They did not report them back then. However, now, various government military services, including the Police, Army, and Navy, are present in the area to record such occurrences.
07	Have you seen any live animals while out at sea? Do you report these to anyone? If yes, to whom?	• They do not go to the sea, so they lack that kind of experience. They are all part of school communities.
08	Have you learnt anything new in this workshop? If yes, is there something you will share with your family and kids when you get home?	Yes. • The largest mammal in the ocean is the blue whale, while the largest fish is the whale shark. • They learned that there are seven species of turtles in the world many of which are in Sri Lanka. Before the workshop, they were not aware of this.

Table 2. Transcribed Feedback from the Pulmoddai, Trincomalee Community Workshop.

No.	Community Workshop Feedback
1	This workshop is valuable. We gained new knowledge and kindly request more programs like this in the future.
2	This is the first workshop in 20 years about threatened coastal species. Really happy that you informed this rural school.
3	We learned a lot about ocean creatures and their surroundings. We wish Oceanswell to conduct more workshops like this.
4	The program conducted by Oceanswell at our school was very important, and we gained a lot of new knowledge. Please conduct more programs for our province.
5	This program is really good and important for people in this province, as they are engaged in fisheries. Thank you for selecting us. The workshop was conducted in an attractive manner.
6	The program on ocean creatures and birds was valuable. I learned a lot of new things and wish you more energy to continue these programs for society.
7	Dear daughters and sons, I learned a lot from you. May you have the courage and energy to conduct more programs about Sri Lanka's value. May the Triple Gem bless you.
8	I am thankful because I learned new things beyond my current knowledge from the program on 2025.02.17. Wishing you more energy to continue such programs.
9	Learned something new. Please conduct similar programs annually to inform the public. Do more programs to educate us. – Principal.
10	The marine mammal conservation program by Oceanswell at Trincomalee Kanijaweli Sinhala School on 2025.02.17 was a valuable lesson. We are happy to have learned all the details correctly. Wishing you more energy to continue such programs. Thank you to everyone involved.
11	We received correct facts about threatened marine animals from this program. Wishing you more energy to continue these educational efforts and share knowledge.
12	The information about the ocean, marine creatures, birds, and marine mammals was very valuable. It would be beneficial to share this knowledge with school children as well.



Figure 1. Key moments captured during the community workshop presentation in Trincomalee.

4.1.2. Workshop 2 – Poruthota, Negombo

Date: 2025/02/19

Time: 4.00 p.m. – 5.30 p.m.

Venue: St. Sebastian's Church – Poruthota

Target Audience: Fishermen

Summary: The workshop had 23 attendees, including 14 females, 5 males, 2 boys, and 2 girls. Most participants were fishermen, fish vendors, and coastal villagers. They showed strong interest in the presentation and were actively engaged throughout the session.

Group Discussion: A half-hour discussion followed the presentation. During this time, the attendees mentioned that they learned many new things from the presentation. While they were familiar with turtles, they were unaware of the different species. They also shared their personal experiences with us. We asked questions during the discussion, and their responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Questions Asked During the Discussion and Participant Responses at Negombo Community.

No.	Questions	Answers
01	Have you ever seen a dead marine mammal, sea bird or turtle?	Yes. - Dead whales have been seen in the deep ocean as well as washed ashore after dying. - Although not recently, some turtles have been observed visiting the area to lay their eggs.

No.	Questions	Answers
02	If yes, when you find the dead animal, what do you do?	People searched online for wildlife contact numbers to inform the authorities, as they did not know any fixed numbers. There is no wildlife office in the area, so they have to contact the Colombo head office. According to the community, by the time wildlife officers arrive, damage may have already occurred.
03	Do you see them washed up on the beach or entangled in nets?	Yes - Turtles often get entangled in nets and die, and in such cases, there is nothing they can do. However, if the animal is still alive, they release it back into the sea. - Dolphins have been found entangled in 'Piyamassa dal,' and dead dugongs have also been observed caught in fishing nets.
04	Do you often see them?	Yes Most of the time, Dolphins and Turtles get entangled in 18-inch mesh size 'Madu Dala' (Ray nets).
05	Do you know if you can report this information to authorities? It is very valuable information for us to continue to understand these animals.	Yes
06	Do you know where to report any dead animals?	Yes They searched online for the Wildlife Department's contact information and reached out to them.
07	Have you seen any live animals while out at sea? Do you report these to anyone? If yes, to whom?	Yes Tuna is always found in waters where dolphins live.
08	Have you learnt anything new in this workshop? If yes, is there something you will share with your family and kids when you get home?	They studied the species names that were mentioned. Before the workshop, they were not aware of these names.



Figure 2. Key moments from the community workshop presentation in Poruthota, Negombo, highlighting participant engagement and discussions.

4.2. School Workshops

4.2.1. Workshop 3 – Trincomalee

Date: 2025/02/18

Time: 12.00 p.m. – 1.30 p.m.

Venue: T/TN/ Kanijaweli Sinhala Vidyalaya – Pulmoddai

Target Audience: School Students

Summary: The workshop was attended by 50 school students which including 30 females and 20 males from ages 5 to 16 years old (Grade 1 to 11). To accommodate the younger students, we simplified the content. Notably, the grade 11 (16 years old) students actively participated, engaging enthusiastically throughout the session. During the workshop, students shared their experiences of encountering PET marine species, such as sea turtles and seabirds. Many of them come from coastal areas, with most of their fathers working as fishermen. This background fuelled their curiosity, leading them to ask insightful questions. Some even shared stories of going to sea with their fathers. To encourage interactive learning, we divided the students into five groups, each consisting of 10 members. They were given a questionnaire-based activity with a 10-minute time limit, and a countdown was displayed to keep track. The students actively participated but mentioned that the time was insufficient. The winning team was rewarded with Oceanswell comic books as gifts.



Figure 3. Students actively engaged in the interactive session with the presenters.

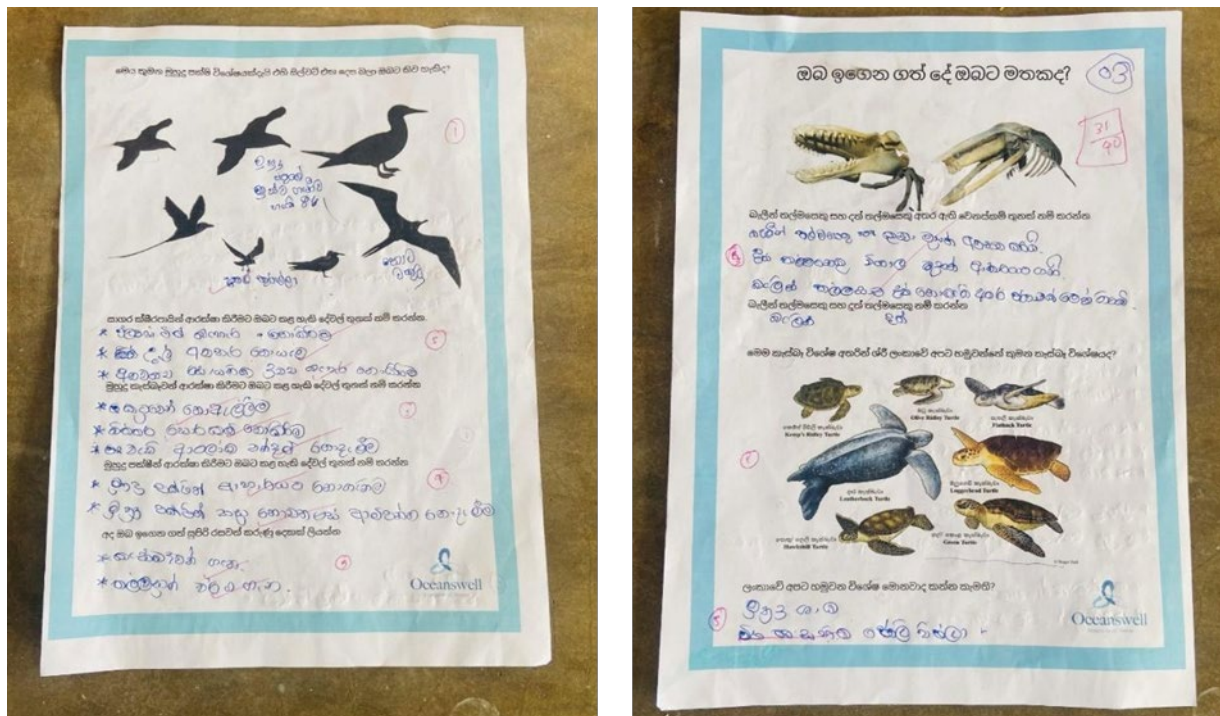


Figure 4. Two sides of an activity sheet filled with student responses during the interactive session.

4.2.2. Workshop 4 – Negombo

Date: 2025/02/19

Time: 10:45 AM – 12:00 PM

Venue: St. Mary's College – Negombo (Boys' School)

Target Audience: School Students – Grade 8

Summary: The workshop was attended by approximately 170 boys. All students were 13 years old, who displayed great enthusiasm and actively engaged with the instructors. They eagerly participated in discussions, answering questions and posing their own inquiries, particularly about PET species. Some students also had questions about mythical creatures, which we were able to address.

A notable number of students came from fishing families, and they shared their personal experiences regarding these species. Their coastal backgrounds contributed to their curiosity, leading to insightful questions from them. While most students were familiar with marine mammals and sea turtles, the majority had little prior knowledge about seabirds.

Overall, more than 50% of the students expressed a keen interest in the topics covered, highlighting the success of the workshop.



Figure 5. Key moments from the school workshop presentation at St. Mary's College in Negombo.



Figure 6. Students eagerly raise their hands to answer questions while actively engaging with the presenters during the school workshop.

4.2.3. Workshop 5 – Negombo

Date: 2025/02/19

Time: 12:15 PM – 1:30 PM

Venue : St. Mary's College – Negombo

Target Audience: School Students - Grade 9

Summary: The workshop was attended by approximately 180 boys. All students were 14 years old, who demonstrated greater focus compared to the Grade 8 participants while maintaining a strong interest in the session. As one instructor led the discussion, others walked around the audience, engaging with students and encouraging them to share their thoughts and questions.

Similar to the previous group, we identified several students from fishing backgrounds who asked insightful questions about PET species, drawing from their own experiences. While most of them were already familiar with these species, the session provided them with a deeper understanding of their ecological significance. To ensure active participation and comprehension, we continuously engaged the students by posing questions throughout the session. This interactive approach reinforced key concepts while keeping the students involved and attentive throughout the workshop.





Figure 7. Key moments from the workshop presentation at St. Mary's College in Negombo, highlighting the engagement of Grade 9 school children in discussions and activities.



Figure 8. Comic books donated to the St. Mary's College library in Negombo, presented as a gift to the school principal.

4.2.4. Workshop 6 – Colombo

Date: 2025/03/04

Time: 2:00 PM – 4:00 PM

Venue : Ananda College, Colombo 10 (Boys' School)

Target Audience: School Students

Summary: The audience for this workshop primarily comprised students enthusiastic about marine science, as it was organised in collaboration with the school's Marine Association. This workshop was conducted as a component of a larger Oceanswell workshop on marine conservation led by Ms Senani Senanayake. A total of 36 boys participated, ranging from 11 to 18 years old (Grade 6 to 13). These students demonstrated significant enthusiasm, actively engaging with the instructors by contributing to discussions, answering questions, and posing inquiries, particularly about PET species. Compared to participants in the other three school workshops, students in this session exhibited a more advanced understanding of marine science concepts. Many expressed a strong interest in pursuing marine science in their higher studies. Although most students had a strong understanding of marine mammals and sea turtles, their familiarity with seabirds was relatively limited. Nonetheless, over 90% of the participants displayed a high level of enthusiasm for the topics discussed, highlighting the workshop's overall success.



Figure 9. Key moments from a school workshop presentation at Ananda College, Colombo 10.



Figure 10. Donation of comic books to the Ananda College library, presented as a gift to the teachers in charge of the Marine Association (left). Presentation of a souvenir from the Marine Association of Ananda College to Oceanswell.org in appreciation of their dedication and contributions (right).

5. Discussion

The workshops focused on two distinct fisheries areas and their student communities, providing valuable insights into PET mobile marine species including marine mammals, turtles, and seabirds. These regions differ significantly in monsoon patterns; some recorded species are highly localised. For instance, Dugongs have only been documented in the Mannar and Kalpitiya regions. Despite these differences, both communities predominantly communicate in Sinhala, though a multicultural environment is evident, with Sinhala and Tamil populations present.

Students actively shared personal experiences, often recounting stories passed down by their parents, many of whom have had remarkable offshore fishing encounters. Even if the children

themselves are not directly involved in fishing, they are familiar with its practices and associated species through these shared narratives. However, there is a significant lack of scientific awareness regarding these species, their conservation, and the consequences of illegal activities. Many individuals unknowingly contribute to species decline by hunting marine animals such as turtles, discarding their shells, and consuming the meat. Traditional beliefs often drive these practices rather than culinary preferences. The general population remains largely unaware of the long-term consequences of indiscriminate hunting and its role in species extinction.

During the workshop, participants were highly engaged and listened attentively, showing a growing awareness of the severity of the situation as they learned about the scientific importance of these species and the global impact of their decline, and how they contribute to wider ecosystem health. Additionally, many were unaware of the legal repercussions of capturing these species. Some participants shared firsthand knowledge of illegal fishing activities and related arrests. However, they also acknowledged that some illicit activities occur undetected in deep-sea fishing operations. Both areas are monitored by military services and government organisations, ensuring a degree of protection.

A comparison between Pulmoddai, Trincomalee, and Negombo highlighted differences in students' awareness. While students from both regions shared their experiences, those from Negombo exhibited a higher level of scientific knowledge and awareness about marine species. Notably, many students admitted to having consumed turtle eggs in the past but, after the workshop, expressed their interest in participating in conservation efforts and engaged more actively in discussions.

Significant gaps exist in data availability, particularly regarding species records from 20–30 years ago in the Pulmoddai region. This raises questions about whether past records were not maintained due to a lack of awareness or if certain species have genuinely disappeared from the area, such as turtles no longer nesting on its beaches. Addressing this gap requires further research and community engagement to reconstruct historical data and assess the current status of these species.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The community workshops provided valuable insights into the perceptions, knowledge, and practices related to marine mammals, sea turtles, and seabirds in Sri Lanka. While both study areas exhibited unique ecological characteristics and cultural influences, a common challenge was the lack of scientific awareness regarding these species, and their conservation needs. Traditional beliefs and historical practices continue to drive unsustainable activities, often without recognition of their long-term consequences. Encouragingly, the workshops facilitated a shift in perception among participants, highlighting the importance of education and engagement in fostering conservation efforts. The observed knowledge gap, particularly in the Pulmoddai region, underscores the need for further research to reconstruct historical species records and assess changes over time. Table 4 presents the recommendations along with the strategies for achieving them.

Table 4. Workshop Recommendations and Practical Approaches for Marine Species Conservation.

Recommendation	How could this be achieved
Develop localized educational programs on marine conservation	Engage schools, fisheries cooperatives, and local organizations to integrate conservation topics into their curriculum and activities
Support responsible fishing and habitat protection	Promote initiatives that encourage sustainable fishing practices and the preservation of critical marine habitats
Conduct systematic surveys to document species presence	Focus on regions with limited historical data and involve researchers to verify community-reported species
Involve communities in citizen science projects	Engage locals in biodiversity monitoring efforts; provide tools and training to help collect meaningful data
Introduce biodiversity monitoring apps like iNaturalist and Bird	Incorporate training sessions in future programs to teach communities how to use these tools effectively
Use storytelling and visual media for cultural shift	Create compelling narratives and visual content that resonate with local communities and promote marine conservation values
Develop community-led conservation initiatives	Empower local stakeholders to design and lead projects aimed at protecting marine biodiversity, ensuring their active participation and ownership