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Legal Protection and Management of Marine Ecosystem: What Maldives Can Learn from India?

Shabbir S.

*Maldives National University, Maldives
shahabshabbir@gmail.com*

Abstract

The Republic of Maldives has one of the richest marine biodiversity of the world. The country's coral reefs are the seventh largest in the world, representing some 5% of the global reef area. Its 21,000 km² of reefs are home to 250 species of coral, which teem with over 1,000 species of fish and this unique environment is the bedrock of their economy as well. Fisheries and tourism are their two largest industries which are heavily dependent on a healthy and diverse marine ecosystem. These two industries alone provide three quarters of jobs, 90% of the GDP and two thirds of foreign exchange earnings for the Maldives. Moreover, healthy coral reefs help protect the islands from natural disasters and guard against the adverse effects of climate change.

However, in recent years, the economic and environmental health of Maldives has been put to jeopardy by taking the biodiversity as granted and neglecting the natural environment for earning short-term profits. The real time protection of the Maldivian biodiversity is, thus, not only important for the country's environmental health but it is also an economic and developmental imperative. As the nation has witnessed political unrest and social instability in the recent years, the legal instrument and management mechanics for the ecosystem conservation and protection is hardly available. An inspiration for a proper compliance mechanism is thus a sine qua non for the Maldives.

India, being a remarkable growth holder in terms of marine biodiversity conservation, could be a source helpful in shaping the future legal mechanism for the preservation and management of marine ecosystem in the Maldives. The Indian legal system has a distinct arrangement for the conservation of its biodiversity in general and its marine ecosystem in particular. There are 31 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in India, which cover a total area of 6271.2 km². It has made strong coastal regulation laws for ensuring effective management of marine biodiversity which could be helpful in shaping the future legal compliance mechanism for the protection and conservation of Maldives' ecosystem.

Keywords: Marine biodiversity, Legal mechanism, Conservation, Management, Protected areas