

Manta Tour Operator Standards – Kona, Hawaii

Drafted by Manta Tour Operators as a Voluntary Standards
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The purpose of the Manta Tour Operator Standards is to increase the safety of manta rays and their habitat as well as the safety of the users and participants of the manta tour experience. The goal is to establish community practices and to educate those people involved.

Definitions in this document:

- **Users** include but are not limited to: owners of manta tour operations, boat captains and crew, snorkel or scuba diving guides, professional videographers or photographers, etc.
- **Participants** include but are not limited to: passengers, kayakers, paddle boarders, snorkelers, scuba divers, recreational videographers or photographers, etc.

1) Manta Tour Conduct

- a) All users and participants are expected to work cooperatively as a community at the manta viewing sites with the existing best practices for the area.
- b) Improving existing practices are encouraged, but should be a cooperative effort.
- c) Professional and courteous conduct expected among all users and participants.

2) Boat Procedures and Mooring Use

- a) When approaching or departing the manta viewing area, make safe speed with no wake and post a look out. Watch for snorkelers, divers, mantas, and other marine life. Avoid driving through area of human and marine life activity.
- b) Captains must monitor marine radio channel 16 per United States Coast Guard requirements and should use channel 14 for manta site communication.
- c) Work cooperatively with other boaters when using moorings to safely maximize utilization of the site. Choose a mooring that will enhance the safety and experience of all participants at the site.
- d) Mooring ball located subsurface. Boat crew expected to enter water with a line from the boat, dive down to the ball, thread the line through the eye on the mooring ball, and swim the line back up to boat where it will be secured.
- e) The crew must check that the mooring is adequate and usable. Moorings in need of repair must be reported immediately.
- f) Although discouraged, if anchoring, observe State rules and regulations.

Have a crew member in the water when deploying the anchor to avoid people, coral, and other marine life.

- g) Avoid live boating, but when necessary avoid driving through the area of human and marine life activity.
- h) All vessels (boats, kayaks, paddle boards, surf boards, etc.) must display required navigation lights. Please reference USCG rules.
- i) All boats must comply with applicable federal and state rules and regulations. All commercial operators must have a commercial operating permit from the State of Hawaii.

3) To prevent manta injury or entanglement

- a) Lights from boats must be used in a manner to be safe for manta rays and other marine life.
- b) All operators/users must eliminate in-water light use near boat ladders, rudders, propellers, or other harmful boat apparatus where manta contact may occur. This includes, but is not limited to: hull lights, snorkel raft lights, or lights from videographers.
- c) Subsurface lights from boats may only be used if lights are more than 30 feet from boat ladders, rudders, propellers, or other harmful boat apparatus where manta contact may occur.
- d) Operators must not attract mantas near their boats if other users and participants are at the site.
- e) Boat operators may use deck lighting. Topside lights used to shine into the water must have a beam aimed at a minimum distance of 30 feet from the boat. Topside lights such as this may be used only if it's conducive to cooperative manta viewing for all users and participants during the experience.
- f) Operators must remove skegs from rafting apparatus.
- g) Boat and tour operators must minimize line use in the water other than for mooring or anchoring purposes.
- h) After sunset or when mantas are present, descent lines must not be used.
- i) Lines between vessels must not be allowed to sink.
- j) If using lines, kayaks, rafting apparatus, etc. must use buoyant lines.

4) Dive and Snorkel Guide Standards

- a) Operators with in-water activities must have in-water guides for each activity - surface and underwater.
- b) In-water guides must have in-water supervision training and rescue certifications. For example, snorkel guides must be Lifeguard, Skin Diving Guide, or Rescue Diver certified.
- c) Scuba diving guides must have current professional level certifications from agencies recognized by the Recreational Scuba Training Council. Professional level certifications include dive supervisors such as Divemasters or Scuba Instructors. All scuba professionals must carry personal liability insurance.

- d) All guides must have CPR/First Aid training and access to an Emergency Oxygen system (on boat or EMS).
- e) After sunset, all divers and snorkelers not in direct contact with their vessel must display one marker light. All guides and working professionals must identify themselves with two marker lights.
- f) After sunset, all participants must stay with their guide.
- g) Each operator must have an emergency recall procedure.
- h) Snorkel guides must have a visible surface float during daylight.
- i) Snorkelers and divers must not go beneath live boats.

5) Participant Standards (first established in 1993)

- a) Observe Only: No touching. Resist the urge to “pet” the mantas. This will only rub off their protective mucus coating. Do not chase, grab, or try to ride the mantas. This does not benefit the animal in any way.
- b) Diver Position: Divers must stay on or near the sand, rubble, or boulder bottom. An open water column is necessary for the mantas to maneuver. Avoid contact with the coral, sea urchins, or other marine life. Form a semi-circle with your group.
- c) Snorkeler Position: Snorkelers must stay on the surface and keep legs horizontal. Do not dive down into the water column.
- d) Lights: Divers shine lights up into the water column to attract plankton. Snorkelers shine lights down.
- e) Bubbles: Divers try to time your breathing so that you do not blow bubbles up into the manta if it passes over your head.
- f) Taking photos or video: When taking underwater photos or video, be considerate of people and mantas. Minimize your equipment in the water column and let the mantas come to you.

6) Professional Videographer and Photographer Standards

- a) Professional videographers and photographers must identify themselves with two marker lights.
- b) When shooting video or taking photos of mantas or divers, professional videographers and photographers must stay on or near the bottom. Stay out of the water column in the area of manta ray activity.
- c) When shooting video or taking photos of mantas and snorkelers, professional videographers or photographers must stay on or near the surface. Stay out of the water column in the area of manta ray activity.
- d) When descending or ascending, professional videographers or photographers must stay out of the water column in the area of manta ray activity.
- e) Professional videographers or photographers must be aware of their proximity to the campfire, scuba divers, snorkelers, boats, moorings, and the bottom - especially when setting up for or taking a shot.
- f) Professional videographers or photographers must not shine video lights or deploy camera flashes into the faces of those who are not their designated customers. Be aware of the field of the beam of light and

- narrow it when necessary.
- g) Work from the outside of the area of manta activity shooting in to concentrate plankton and mantas. Do not shine lights in other areas that attract mantas away from the main area of activity – intentionally or unintentionally.

Please see Appendix for more detailed information in how to meet these standards.

APPENDIX

The following information is based on the “tribal knowledge” of manta tour operators, scuba diving guides, snorkel guides, and boat captains from decades of experience in the manta tour industry. This information is in the form of guidelines to educate users in best practices to meet the Manta Tour Operator Standards.

General Information for all Users:

COMMUNICATION: Good communication is essential. Thoroughly brief guests to increase their understanding of best applicable practices in the water including safety protocol and courteous behavior. In addition, communicate with other snorkel guides, scuba diving guides and boat captains to share information, coordinate in water activities, and assist each other if appropriate. Captains encouraged to share mobile phone numbers whenever possible for communication.

CAMPFIRE METHOD: The “campfire” is created by using a light system on the bottom shining up to attract plankton that in turn attracts manta rays. Configurations vary. It’s also designed to gather users and participants to a specific location with a rubble or sand bottom. This is important because divers are asked to stay on the bottom when observing manta rays. A single campfire location concentrates light, plankton and professional supervision in a manageable area. Divers and snorkelers congregate around the underwater campfire location and help to enhance the concentration of plankton and manta rays. Multiple campfires can create a dispersal of manta ray feeding, resulting in a diminished experience for everyone. In the case a campfire needs to be moved during a dive, snorkel and scuba diving guides work together to avoid splintering into multiple locations. Reasons for moving a campfire include but are not limited to: higher concentrations of plankton, environmental conditions, and mantas rays feeding in another area.

Snorkel Guides:

LIGHTS: If guests have individual lights instruct in proper light etiquette. While snorkeling, snorkelers shine lights down and avoid shining their lights in eyes of those around them.

SURFACE FLOATS: Surface floats and rafting devices are used to keep customers together and provide additional floatation for participants. Guides will actively reposition surface float devices to keep manta rays and guests away from mooring lines, boats, hazards and other groups.

SNORKELER SURROUNDINGS: Be aware of shifting boat positions and keep snorkelers away from boats when possible. If snorkelers are struggling with

mask or snorkel, pull them back from the area where manta rays are feeding until they are comfortable lying flat on the surface.

ADDITIONAL BUOYANCY: Provide additional buoyancy to snorkelers to keep legs on surface – wet suits, noodles under legs, or buoyant fins.

Scuba Diving Guides:

LIGHTS: Instruct divers in proper light etiquette. While diving, scuba divers shine lights up and avoid shining their lights in eyes of those around them.

DIVER ETIQUETTE: Brief guests on proper weighting for the manta ray dive. To avoid uncontrolled descents impacting mantas or other divers, descend at a comfortable distance from other groups and approach the campfire along the bottom. Divers should perform proper buoyancy when swimming from boat to campfire location. Find a suitable area for divers to position themselves in a spot to prevent them from making contact with other divers or marine life. Keep your divers together and allow for comfortable space between groups for control, repositioning, or extracting guests.

MOORINGS: Crew encouraged to scrub mooring balls whenever possible to make them easier to find for all members of the community.

Boat Captains:

TRAINING: Conduct vessel specific training and drills for crew on recall, evacuation, and missing guest procedures.

POSITION OF VESSEL: Monitor position of vessel. Avoid engaging propellers in proximity to campfire. If conditions alter the position of vessels during the manta ray activity use good judgment in repositioning vessel.

MOORING USE: When tying to a vessel on a mooring, take into consideration timing of the activity. If your group needs longer on the mooring, consider exchanging positions prior to the activity to allow for a courteous use of the mooring.

TOOLS: Have proper tools at hand to accommodate rapidly changing conditions. A boat hook and cutting device are recommended.
