



## Manta Rays in Paradise: Working as a Marine Biologist on a Private Island

The Salt Sirens © May 17, 2020

A private sea plane or helicopter brings you to [Kokomo Private Island Fiji](#), a luxury getaway in Fiji where days are spent deciding whether you should have your cocktail by your private pool or on deck of the resort's seaside lounge area.



Around Kokomo Private Resort is the Great Astrolabe Reef, a fringing coral reef that spans about 65 kilometers long, encompassing Kokomo Island and its neighboring islands. Needless to say, it's an incredible scuba diving and snorkeling destination where you're bound to see something interesting on each dive.

At The Salt Sirens, we've caught up with Cliona O'Flaherty, a marine biologist and dive instructor for a dive and a chat about the island's manta ray conservation project, Kokomo Manta Conservation Project (KMCP) in collaboration with Manta Project Fiji.

### **Hey Cliona, what inspired you to move all the way from Ireland to a remote island in Fiji?**

In 2015, I fell in love with Fiji when I volunteered on a marine conservation project. This is where I learned to dive and immediately knew I wanted to share this experience with others so began my voyage in becoming a dive instructor. Both the marine life and friendliness of the Fijian people stole my heart.

I began working at Kokomo Private Island Fiji as a resident Marine Biologist and Dive Instructor in 2017. Since then, it has been an absolute whirlwind! Our projects have expanded so much we now have an all-female Kokomo Marine Biology Team with [Viviana Taubera](#) joining us last year. Viviana is an amazing marine biologist and diver from [Taveuni](#) (Fiji). She has spent most of her life underwater—she is a true “Moana” of Fiji!



Cliona and Viviana (Credit: Kokomo Private Island Fiji)

### **Can you tell us more about the Kokomo Manta Conservation Project?**

The Kokomo Manta Conservation Project (KMCP) began in 2017 and is a collaborative project with the [Manta Project Fiji](#) which is an affiliate of the Manta Trust. This KMCP project aims to help preserve, protect and raise awareness about the importance of Manta rays in our waters. There are three key aspects of the KMCP:

**Photographic Identification Work:** this part of the project focuses on taking photographic images of manta rays underside (belly). Each manta ray has its own unique spot pattern (like a birth mark) and is unique to each individual. So far the KMCP has helped identify 115 manta rays which is approximately 36% of the Fiji database. We love getting guests involved in this part of the project by helping us take photos and later identify individuals.

**The Acoustic Tagging Project:** this project is one of our biggest parts of the KMCP and is being led by [Luke Gordon](#) (Project Leader of Manta Project Fiji). This project aims to look at site fidelity of Reef Manta Rays around Kokomo and its surrounding waters. This will hopefully give us more insight into key areas the mantas use and how we can help monitor and protect these areas. This project is the first of its kind in Fiji and the South Pacific which is groundbreaking for science and conservation.

**Adoption Initiative:** This part of the project allows passionate people to make direct contributions to the project by adopting mantas and making donations to the project. All proceeds go directly towards equipment for the project.

It has been an absolute dream to help establish and further develop the KMCP. In areas of conservation where there is a lack of financial support for critical scientific research, lies a great opportunity for the private sector and entities just like Kokomo. Without the combined contributions of Lang Walker, the KMCP and the Manta Project Fiji, manta conservation would not be where it is today in Fiji.



### **How many manta rays come around Kokomo, do you have a favorite?**

We typically start seeing mantas on the surface from **April right through to September**. Sometimes you can see one individual and other times it can be 20 or 30 just 200 meters from shore. Even if its one or a dozen it is always a spectacle!

It is very hard for me to pick a favorite. I really enjoy seeing the juvenile younger mantas and also when there is a new female pregnant but if I had to pick one it would be a manta called "Cheeky." He is so named because he swam up and tapped me in the face with his fin the first time I saw him—an epic introduction!

### **From an outsider, it can seem like manta rays all look the same. How can you tell one manta ray from the other?**

As part of the KMCP's Photographic Identification Work we look at the spot patterns on the belly of each manta. Each of these spot patterns is like a birth mark and helps us distinguish new individuals from one another. So far this season we have already identified a new individual – "Samu" who was first identified last week 100 meters from shore.

### **Do manta rays have their own obvious personalities?**

I am no expert on saying whether mantas have specific personalities or not, but from what I have observed over the past three years there are definitely individuals that are showing some sort of signs of personality. Some individuals will come closer than others, juveniles tend to be a bit more curious as to what we are. Some very large females "appear" to be more relaxed than other smaller males. Mantas have a very large brain so are highly intelligent creatures. It wouldn't surprise me if they all have individual personalities.

## What has been your most memorable moment while working on this project?

There have been so many amazing memories while working on this project it's so hard to pick one. On World Ocean Day in 2018 we had 20 mantas feeding 200 meters off our jetty for 3 hours—unforgettable. Last year in July, we had a similar exhibition only this time almost 40 showed up to feed just off our shore—crazy! I think what is the most rewarding is other people's reaction when they first see the mantas and how they experience it with us at Kokomo. The KMCP promotes sustainable interactions with mantas by only have 4-6 people snorkeling with the mantas for each session. This makes it more enjoyable for both the guests and the mantas. We have even had people exiting the boat with tears in their eyes completely overwhelmed with emotion. This is the end goal, getting people to really care about mantas and creating the most memorable moments for them!

## What other sea life do you regularly see when diving around Kokomo?

Kokomo is surrounded by the Great Astrolabe Reef and there is always something spectacular to see. Right off the shore you can see about five Green Turtles grazing on our sea grass beds most days. Other resident species we regularly see around Kokomo include baby Blacktip Reef Sharks, Whitetip Reef Sharks, Eagle Rays, Sting Rays, Hawksbill Turtles, many coral reef fish and lots of hard coral varieties.



Should you chose to venture to the outer reef you may have a chance of seeing some more rarer species including Marbled Rays, Zebra Sharks, Grey Reef Sharks, Hammerheads, larger pelagic fish and lots of soft corals. The marine life always puts on a show!

## How can readers get involved in this project?

Our goal is to get people as excited about mantas as we are so if anyone is looking to get involved in the Adoption Initiative or any other parts of the project please contact us directly via [email](#). For more information on our other sustainability projects and initiatives at Kokomo please check out our [Kokomo Sustainability](#) page. There are a lot of cool projects and some other exciting ones in the pipeline!

For regular updates on the KMCP please follow us on Instagram at [@mantaprojectfiji](#), [@kokomoislandfiji](#), [@lukegordonphotography](#), [@mantatrust](#), or on [@coflahe](#). You can also learn more about the project on Facebook at [Kokomo Private Island Fiji](#), [Manta Project Fiji](#), and [Manta Trust](#) pages.

Link: <https://thesaltsirens.com/kokomo-manta-ray-conservation-project/>