

CITIZEN PROPOSAL

Fuvahmulah Green Canopy & Wetland Ecotourism Network

Conservation · Education · Nature Tourism · Community Benefit



Reference example: an elevated canopy boardwalk through native woodland, similar in concept to the walkways proposed for Fuvahmulah's wetland areas (Hainich National Park, Germany)

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Executive Summary

Fuvahmulah is already known around the world for its tiger shark diving. It has become one of the Maldives' leading diving destinations. However, diving should not be the only reason people visit our island.

Fuvahmulah also has another natural asset that only a handful of inhabited islands in the Maldives possess: freshwater lakes, wetlands, lush native vegetation, extensive Java plum (Dhanvah Baal) groves and unique terrestrial ecosystems that are becoming increasingly rare in our country.

Instead of clearing these natural areas for development, we should protect them, improve access to them responsibly, and allow both residents and visitors to experience them without damaging the environment.

This proposal recommends expanding nature-based tourism through elevated canopy boardwalks, bird observation areas, nature trails and environmental education, while ensuring conservation remains the foundation of every development.

Background

When people think about tourism in Fuvahmulah, they immediately think about tiger sharks. But there is another side of Fuvahmulah that deserves equal attention.

Our freshwater wetlands, extensive Dhanvah Baal groves, native vegetation and peaceful green spaces are among the natural features that make Fuvahmulah special. While Java plum trees can also be found on other islands, they are particularly abundant here and form an important part of our natural landscape.

Visitors can already experience some of these natural areas through the existing wetland boardwalk and guided visits to Kodakilhi, where the island's famous natural black mud is found. These are excellent beginnings. However, these experiences remain limited in accessibility, scale and interpretation. With careful planning, they can be developed into a more complete ecotourism experience while preserving the very environment that attracts visitors.

As tourism continues to grow, we have an opportunity to build on what already exists. Rather than replacing nature with more concrete, we can allow nature itself to become one of Fuvahmulah's defining attractions.

The Proposal

1. Expand the Nature Boardwalk Network

Expand the existing boardwalk by developing a network of elevated canopy boardwalks through selected native woodland and wetland areas.

The purpose of expanding the boardwalk network is to allow residents and visitors to experience Fuvahmulah's natural environment while protecting the very ecosystems they have come to enjoy. By keeping visitors on designated elevated walkways, damage to vegetation, peat soils and sensitive wetland habitats can be greatly reduced while making these areas more accessible.

Possible features include:

- Elevated canopy boardwalks
- Viewing platforms
- Resting areas
- Bird observation hides
- Information panels explaining the island's ecology
- QR codes providing information about native plants and wildlife

The intention is not to replace the existing wetland boardwalk, but to build on it. A carefully planned network of elevated walkways could connect additional areas of ecological interest, improve accessibility, and create more opportunities for environmental education, birdwatching and nature appreciation while keeping disturbance to wildlife and sensitive habitats to a minimum.

2. Establish a Bird Conservation Area

Develop one main protected bird conservation area adjacent to one of the island's wetland systems.

This would not be a place for captive birds. It would remain a natural habitat where birds can be observed without disturbing them.

Possible facilities include:

- Bird observation hides
- Quiet viewing shelters
- Viewing tower
- Habitat restoration areas
- Environmental education centre
- Research and monitoring facilities

This could become an important location for birdwatching, nature photography, environmental education and ecological research.

3. Wetland Discovery Centre

Develop a small visitor centre where residents, students and tourists can learn about Fuvahmulah's unique inland environment.

The centre could include information on:

- Freshwater ecosystems
- Wetlands
- Peat soils
- Groundwater recharge
- Native birds
- Native plants
- Biodiversity conservation

The centre could also serve as an educational resource for schools and visitors while promoting greater appreciation of Fuvahmulah's natural heritage.

4. Nature Recreation Areas

Develop quiet recreation areas where people can enjoy nature through activities such as:

- Morning walks
- Guided nature tours
- Birdwatching
- Nature photography

- Outdoor learning
- Quiet seating areas

Lighting should be avoided wherever possible. Where lighting is necessary for visitor safety, it should be low-intensity, downward-facing and designed to minimise disturbance to birds and other wildlife during the night.

5. Nature Management and Stewardship

Developing nature-based tourism should also include a long-term management plan to ensure that these areas remain clean, safe and environmentally healthy.

This proposal recommends establishing a dedicated team of Nature Rangers responsible for the day-to-day management of the Green Canopy & Wetland Ecotourism Network. Their responsibilities could include:

- Monitoring visitor behaviour
- Preventing littering and vandalism
- Protecting wildlife and sensitive habitats
- Inspecting boardwalks and visitor facilities
- Coordinating routine maintenance
- Providing guidance and information to visitors

Promoting Responsible Nature Tourism

As visitor numbers increase, protecting Fuvahmulah's natural environment will depend not only on good infrastructure but also on responsible visitor behaviour. The network should therefore adopt internationally recognised Leave No Trace principles, adapted to Fuvahmulah's environment.

This means encouraging visitors to stay on designated boardwalks and trails, dispose of waste responsibly, avoid disturbing wildlife or damaging native vegetation, keep noise to a minimum in sensitive areas, and respect conservation and research zones.

Nature Rangers should play an important role in promoting these principles through visitor education and engagement, helping ensure that increased tourism does not come at the expense of the island's unique natural heritage.

Guiding Principles

The project should be guided by a few simple principles.

- Protect nature first.
- Plan not only for construction, but also for long-term management and maintenance.
- Build only what is necessary.
- Keep the environmental footprint as small as possible.

- Restore native vegetation wherever practical.
- Involve the local community.
- Ensure future generations benefit from today's decisions.

Expected Benefits

Environmental	Economic	Social
• Better protection of wetlands and native vegetation • Improved habitat for birds and other wildlife • Increased public appreciation of the island's natural environment • Stronger environmental resilience • Reduces littering, vandalism and habitat disturbance through active management and visitor education	• Diversifies tourism beyond diving • Creates opportunities for local businesses and guides • Encourages visitors to stay longer • Supports sustainable tourism based on conservation rather than land clearance	• Provides healthy outdoor spaces for residents • Creates family-friendly recreational areas • Encourages environmental education • Strengthens pride in Fuvahmulah's natural heritage • Creates local employment opportunities in conservation, environmental education and park management

FUVAHMULAH GREEN CANOPY & WETLAND ECOTOURISM NETWORK

Conservation • Education • Low Impact Tourism • Community Benefit



NOTES:

- All structures to follow low impact design and environmental guidelines.
- Use local, sustainable and durable materials where possible.
- Consult ecology experts and local community during detailed planning.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Healthy ecosystems and wildlife habitats
- Enhanced visitor experience
- Economic opportunities for local community
- Pride and well-being for residents
- Stronger climate resilience

A New Direction for Tourism

Fuvahmulah has already established itself as one of the world's leading destinations for tiger shark diving.

This proposal is not intended to replace that success. Instead, it aims to complement it by developing another tourism product based on one of the island's greatest natural assets — its wetlands, native vegetation and unique inland environment.

Nature-based tourism would appeal not only to international visitors, but also to Maldivians looking for experiences that are difficult to find elsewhere in the country. This would help diversify the local tourism industry while encouraging the protection of the landscapes that make Fuvahmulah special.

Contribution to National Priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals

This proposal supports the conservation objectives of the UNESCO Fuvahmulah Biosphere Reserve by promoting sustainable tourism that protects the island's natural environment while creating economic opportunities for the local community.

It also contributes to several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- **SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth:** Creates new opportunities for local businesses, guides and community-based tourism while diversifying the island's tourism economy.
- **SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities:** Improves public recreational spaces and promotes sustainable use of Fuvahmulah's natural and cultural heritage.
- **SDG 13 – Climate Action:** Supports the conservation of wetlands and native vegetation, helping maintain groundwater recharge, improve climate resilience and protect natural carbon sinks.
- **SDG 15 – Life on Land:** Encourages the protection and sustainable management of wetlands, native vegetation and wildlife habitats while promoting biodiversity conservation.



Conclusion

Fuvahmulah already has the natural resources needed to become a leading destination for nature-based tourism in the Maldives.

By building on the existing boardwalk and other nature-based experiences, and by improving accessibility through carefully planned, low-impact infrastructure, we can create new opportunities for tourism while protecting the island's unique environment.

This proposal does not call for large-scale development. Instead, it recommends practical improvements that allow more people to enjoy Fuvahmulah's wetlands, Dhanvah Baal groves and natural landscapes without compromising their ecological value.

Every new development brings both benefits and responsibilities. While improved access will allow more people to enjoy these natural areas, it also increases the need for proper management and maintenance. Establishing a dedicated Nature Ranger programme will help ensure that the wetlands, boardwalks and visitor facilities remain clean, safe and well protected for future generations.

With careful planning, conservation and tourism can support one another. In doing so, we can strengthen the local economy, improve recreational opportunities for residents, and ensure that future generations inherit the same natural beauty that makes Fuvahmulah one of the most distinctive islands in the Maldives.