

Wetland Tourism: Brazil - Abrolhos Marine National Park



Brazil - Abrolhos National Marine Park © Marcello Lourenco

The Abrolhos Marine National

Park is situated around 70 km from the southern coast of the state of Bahia, Brazil, and is part of the Abrolhos Reef Complex, the largest known reef in the South Atlantic. It encompasses large areas of coral reefs, as well as the Abrolhos archipelago and the nearby Timbebas Reef. The Abrolhos archipelago consists of five islands, the largest of which, called the Santa Bárbara island, is outside the Park boundaries and a military area under the jurisdiction of the Brazilian Navy; the island has a small military garrison and houses the park staff. Created in 1983, Abrolhos is Brazil's first marine park and covers just over 910 km² (91,000 hectares). The National Park is under the jurisdiction of the Chico Mendes Institute of

Biodiversity Conservation (ICMbio) and has been listed as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance since February 2010.

The main reef-building species in the the Abrolhos reefs is the endemic brain coral, *Mussismilia braziliensis*, but 15 other coral species are also found in the reefs, which exhibit unique mushroom-shaped structures, locally called "chapeirão" – these spread out into arcs near the sea surface where they reach 50 meters in diameter, supported by columns of coral up to 6 metres high that rise abruptly from the bottom. The Park's high level of marine biodiversity includes a wide range of algae and fish, as well as marine turtles, humpback whales *Megaptera novaeangliae*, and other endangered species. The



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Park also acts as a fishing repository which helps maintain healthy fish stocks along with some of Brazil's most important fishing areas.

The islands in the Park support at least 32 species of seabirds: the Masked Booby *Sula dactylatra*, Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*, Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*, and Magnificent Frigate bird *Fregata magnificens* are permanent residents on the islands, and a further nine migratory species come to breed on the islands of the Abrolhos.

Tourists visit the islands for scuba diving amongst its colourful reefs and to watch humpback whales which come to breed around the reefs between July and November. The best time for diving is from December to February when underwater visibility is between 10 and 20 metres. Access to the Park is by boat from the mainland – Caravelas city is the main gateway to the Park, but it can also be accessed from several other of Bahia's coastal cities.

An 18 member Consultative Council was established in 2002 to involve various stakeholders – including state and local government, and fishermen's associations – in planning and decision-making for management of the Park. It focuses on four main areas: education, communication and culture, research and public use. In addition to Council members, the committee on public use also includes tourism service providers, particularly boat owners and scuba diving guides, representatives of public institutions and civil society organizations. This committee discusses and proposes actions related to tourism in the Park.

Overall management of the Park takes place within the Park's Management Plan and zoning, first established in 1991. A Public Use Plan was approved in 2003; it defines the guidelines for visitors, including diving and whale and bird observation activities, and it is now part of the Management Plan. Most of the Park is designated as a total protection zone (IUCN class Ia) where no human activities or alterations are permitted. This zone includes nesting areas and the majority of

the reefs. Other areas are designated for scientific research and environmental education. Tourism and leisure activities are confined to designated dive sites and a 0.8 km nature trail on the island of Siriba to enjoy the scenery and do bird-watching.

To protect the Park from excessive impacts from tourism, the Park's regulations set a limit of 225 visitors per day – this is based on a carrying capacity assessment of the Park with the dual purposes of protecting the Park's environment and fragile habitats and ensuring a high quality experience for visitors and a sense of the remoteness and uniqueness of the Park and its dive sites. Only vessels that are accredited by the Park authorities are permitted in the Park. Each vessel is required to meet specifications set by the Brazilian Navy for safety and other operating equipment, and to have waste collection and storage tanks large enough to collect all wastes produced by passengers and crew.

All tourist groups must be accompanied by trained guides who have successfully completed an ecotourism training course run by the ICMBio.

Around a quarter of all tourists visit the reefs on day excursions, which include at least one dive and a visit to the nature trail on Siriba. Tourists can also take 2-4 day trips to the Park, sleeping overnight on dive boats as, except for the nature trail, landing on the islands is not permitted. Tourism in the Park has a strong element of awareness raising: tickets for trips are purchased at information and control desks in the visitor centre at Caravelas city or in other departure ports, and every boat arriving in the Park is welcomed by an ICMBio staff member, who gives visitors a briefing about the Park's wildlife and environment, along with details of the regulations in place to protect the Park.

For over ten years, the park has run a successful Voluntary Internship Program, through which undergraduate students assist with management and research activities and escort visitors on the Siriba nature trail. Research activities include

projects to monitor diving activities in the Park and to assess the effects of tourism on bird populations, as part of developing ways to minimise the impacts of tourism on the Park's wildlife and environment.

Despite the Park's efforts, scuba diving and snorkeling still cause some damage to corals. In the case of scuba diving, many divers come into physical contact with the reef because of failure to properly control their buoyancy. There are also problems with snorkelers standing on reefs and with feeding of fish. Although both standing on reefs and fish feeding are prohibited under park regulations, they have proved difficult to control. Anchors from tourist boats have also damaged corals and seagrass beds: the Park is addressing this by installing fixed mooring buoys at the main

dive sites, and requiring boats to use these instead of anchors.

In recent years, numbers of tourists visiting Abrolhos National Park have fallen from an average of 12,900 between 1998-2001 to 3,500 in 2011. This decline is attributed to a lack of innovation in the tourism products offered, the precarious conditions of roads and the closing of the airport of Caravelas city. To address this, the ICMBio is implementing a concession system under which tour and boat operators will tender for concessions to bring tourists into the Park. The ICMBio has successfully used this system in other parks in Brazil, where it has already led to improvements in standards and tourism management.



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Sources:

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