

## DESTINATIONS

INDIAN OCEAN | MALDIVES



## DR THON THAMRONGNAWASAWAT MARINE BIOLOGIST, CROSSROADS

INTERVIEW BY Katie McGonagle

**Q. Being a marine biologist at a luxury mega-resort in the Maldives sounds like a dream job – how did you get here?**

A. I was born in Bangkok, where my father was permanent secretary for the ministry of agriculture. When I was younger, I had the opportunity to follow him everywhere in Thailand, and he would take me with him to the grand openings of national parks, sometimes even before they were officially opened. I probably went to about 80 national parks and 12 marine national parks, and I fell in love with the sea by the age of six. I decided to study this field because I thought it would be interesting and because knowledge of marine life was limited in Thailand at the time. Now I am working with Thailand's National Reform Committee to oversee the natural resources and environment panel, with a focus on wildlife and national park conservation including Maya Bay and Koh Tachai island, solving plastic pollution and restoring coral reefs.

**Q. What are the biggest challenges facing the Indian Ocean marine ecosystem?**

A. As a marine scientist, I am constantly tackling new problems. Coral reefs in the Maldives have been hit by bleaching as the sea temperature rose dramatically in 2015, and some of these reefs can be found within Crossroads, [a new resort development combining Saii Lagoon Maldives, Hard Rock Hotel Maldives and The Marina]. As we built, these areas were protected

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### DR THON'S TOP TIP

Learn about Maldivian culture and community crafts at the Maldives Discovery Centre, or explore our marine biology lab, clownfish release programme or coral nursery at the Marine Discovery Centre.



and some were kept as broodstock colonies [used for breeding]. The team is focusing on informing people about the vital role of the ocean and the respect we should have for it. This is how the Maldives Discovery Centre got started, and it provides interactive and hands-on learning about oceanography to visitors and local people.

**Q. How do you teach guests about conservation?**

A. Guests can volunteer with the marine biologists at Crossroads; one of the main aims of the development is to encourage guests to join in on the marine conservation and coral propagation efforts. There is also an opportunity for younger guests to get involved with a Junior Coral Curator Program, with a theoretical course followed by a guided tour of the laboratory where mutant corals are revitalised. Young

guests are then taken snorkelling at the very site where the revitalised corals are released, and

at the end of the programme, they receive a certificate as recognition of their new skills. With current trends such as sustainable tourism and trips that encourage travellers to learn a new skill, we expect this to be popular with UK guests.

**Q. Is there anything else people can do to be better informed?**

A. Certainly. Water activities such as scuba diving, snorkelling, releasing clownfish and coral reef conservation are all helpful. The most effective way is to strengthen people's love for the ocean. Seeing it destroyed should encourage people to stand up and do something to help restore and conserve the ocean.

The Crossroads project requires people to come together for it to happen successfully – it's not a short-term

temporary solution, but a long-term one that will protect the coral reefs of the Maldives, so it's a dream project for every marine scientist.

**Q. What is your ultimate goal?**

A. My hope is that Crossroads will make Maldivians proud. They will benefit from education, marine learning, sustainability, and job opportunities. Maldivians will have the chance to become part of our team. I would say that the most important goal for Crossroads is to be a place that educates people about marine life, a place for people to be informed about proper conservation and to fall in love with the ocean. **TW**