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COOK ISLANDS TOURISM PROVIDES UPDATE ON PUBLIC SAFETY MEASURES FOR TURTLE TOUR OPERATORS

Cook Islands, [30 May 2023]

Since the last official meeting held with Turtle Tour operators and Cook Islands Police on 14 April 2023, Cook Islands Tourism has been diligently working to enhance public safety in our waters, particularly in the Avaavaroa area, where Turtle Tour Operators are active. The long-term objective is to implement regulations that prioritise public safety. Significant progress has been made, and several initiatives are currently underway.

One of the key steps taken by Cook Islands Tourism is the commencement of policy development. To ensure a comprehensive and well-informed approach, local consultants and a support researcher will be contracted to undertake this process. While this endeavour is expected to take between 6 to 12 months, an additional 6 to 12 months will be dedicated to legislative drafting, ensuring a thorough and effective regulatory framework.

In the interim, Cook Islands Tourism is implementing a three-step approach to address public safety concerns:

Short-term/immediate: Empowering visitors to make informed decisions by providing readily available information in the public domain. Cook Islands Tourism, in collaboration with the Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council, has ensured that visitors can access relevant information to make informed choices.

Medium-term: Encouraging industry best practice and offering support to Turtle Tour Operators who embrace these practices. A comprehensive toolkit and additional resources to support the current voluntary standards and guidelines will be developed to assist operators in adopting and implementing the best safety measures.

Long-term: Development of regulations that specifically address public safety in our waters. These regulations will be designed to safeguard both the general public and will dovetail in supporting the unique ecosystem (through MMR and NES), ensuring a sustainable and secure environment for all.

To date, Cook Islands Tourism has accomplished several significant milestones in pursuit of these objectives:

The Cook Islands Tourism Industry Council has provided support to ensure that visitors have access to vital information, enabling them to make informed decisions regarding Turtle Tours.

An enhanced communications plan has been established, emphasizing the importance of regular and transparent updates to the industry, general public and visitors. This plan reinforces the principles of frequency, consistency, and transparency.



A combined meeting was held with Aronga Mana and Turtle Tour Operators on Wednesday, 24th May, to discuss the operation of tours in the Avaavaroa passage. This meeting fostered constructive dialogue and collaboration.

Regular collective and individual meetings have been conducted with Turtle Tour Operators to address specific safety concerns that are relevant to their operations.

The 2nd round and review of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been successfully signed by nine out of ten operators, demonstrating their commitment to safety measures. Discussions are underway with the tenth operator, which operates out of Manuia Beach Resort, to encourage their participation as well.

Moving forward, Cook Islands Tourism has outlined the following next steps:

The rollout of the communications plan will extend across various platforms owned and supported by Cook Islands Tourism, including digital, website, and social media. Additional support will be provided to amplify the reach and effectiveness of these initiatives.

Cook Islands Tourism will attend a follow-up meeting with the Vaimaanga Aronga Mana and Avaavaroa Beachfront Landowners, at a time determined by Aronga Mana, to further encourage industry best practice and working collaboratively.

Key concerns raised by Turtle Tour Operators will be carefully reviewed to strengthen the MOU. Areas such as the guide-to-visitor ratio, conditions to operate, operating boats in the water, and certifying guides will be given specific attention.

The Bronze Medallion Course, which aims to enhance water safety skills, will be made available from 23 June to 12 July, providing an opportunity for operators to further equip themselves and their guides with vital knowledge and training.

Expanded discussions with additional stakeholders are planned to ensure a comprehensive, inclusive and solution based approach.

“Public safety remains the priority for Cook Islands Tourism Corporation” says CEO Karla Eggelton, “and we will do all that we can to place this front and centre with all stakeholders to understand we all have a responsibility and role to play here. Let’s not lose a life to remind us of how critical all this work is. We need to prevent and mitigate risk as best we can”.

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For media inquiries and further information, please contact:
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