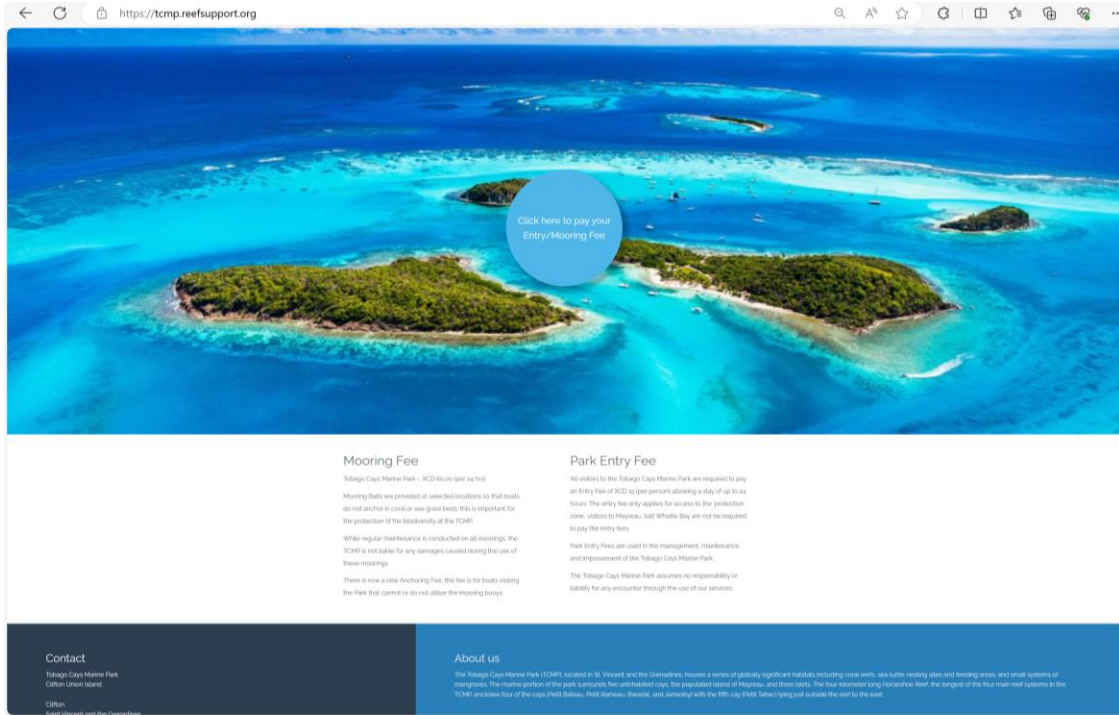


Sharing MPAConnect's knowledge

Tobago Cays Marine Park, St Vincent and the Grenadines

Building efficiency in MPA fee collection



Home page of TCPMP Pay online MPA fee payment system [Reef Support LLC - Tobago Cays Marine Park](https://tcpmpreefsupport.org)

The local context

Tobago Cays Marine Park (TCMP) was a founding member of MPAConnect in 2011 and is a SPAW Priority Site. TCMP consists of five uninhabited offshore islands with sandy beaches and surrounded by coral reefs (zoned as no-take area), plus the larger inhabited island of Mayreau which has popular anchorages and where fishing is allowed on the western side. At 66 sq km in size TCMP is around median size in the MPAConnect network. The TCMP park office is located on Union island, approximately 5 nautical miles from the park. Established in 1997, TCMP is an important local employer and in 2023 has a total of 25 full-time staff.

TCMP is arguably the premier national tourism asset of St Vincent and the Grenadines. The level of visitation is high - from both international tourists and local visitors, many arriving on private or chartered sailing boats for multi-day visits, or by speedboat or other vessels as day charters. Superyachts and some small cruise ships also visit the park. Watersports are popular and include snorkeling with sea turtles, kitesurfing and diving. TCMP has a user fee system that is fully operational and up to date (fee levels were updated in 2023), and fees fund operational costs of site management.

Aside from its importance for tourism, TCMP is home to an important foraging aggregation of juvenile green sea turtles, and it provides nursery habitat for conch and other commercially important species.

Networking and sharing with MPAConnect

Between 2012 and 2023 TCMP has been engaged in five MPAConnect Caribbean regional peer-to-peer workshops and benefited from nine small grants and targeted technical support from MPAConnect. These addressed TCMP's priority needs related to sustainable financing, enforcement, outreach/education, bio-physical monitoring, and management planning.

TCMP was part of MPAConnect's regional peer-to-peer learning exchange on sustainable financing for Caribbean MPAs in the Turks & Caicos Islands in 2019 where they learned about the online MPA fee payment system that originates from STINAPA Bonaire Marine National Park, a leader in marine park sustainable financing in the region. Subsequent to the peer-to-peer workshop, MPAConnect held follow-up online webinars for interested MPA managers with Reef Support BV, developers of the system.

The work of developing and implementing an online MPA fee payment system for TCMP by financing expert Dr. Ramón de León of Reef Support BV was then sponsored by MPAConnect, along with related MPA management capacity building on communications and social media marketing for TCMP. See annex 1 for more details.

Special MPA management expertise



As the first MPA in the MPAConnect network to adopt an online MPA fee payment system from mentor site Bonaire Marine National Park, TCMP brings special experience to the network in relation to the application of information technology for *MPA sustainable financing*. In the process of working with Reef Support BV to adapt the system to TCMP's fee structure for mooring and other visitor fees, the team learned much about the work required for the successful implementation of such a system.

The challenge

Obtain more efficiency in fee collection and financial administration. At the same time, increase revenue generation to help cover MPA capital investments.

The user fees charged by TCMP have principally been collected in cash, on-the-water by the park rangers in their patrol boats. During standard working hours, the rangers go to each new visiting vessel to collect the fees and give a receipt and change as necessary. This fee collection work is time consuming and costly. It prevents the rangers from applying their skills to other important MPA operations, including maintenance work, monitoring, enforcement and education/outreach. It consumes fuel and adds wear-and-tear to park vessels. Handling cash also comes with security risks, brings the need for rigorous standard operating procedures and adds to the administrative burden.

At the same time, TCMP has in common with many MPAs the challenge of how to cover the financial outlay needed for major infrastructure and capital investments, such as for MPA facilities, boats and engines. Given that such capital costs are rarely covered by grant funding, TCMP's need was to raise more sustainable, unrestricted MPA funding.

MPA management action

The online MPA fee payment system developed by Reef Support BV was adapted to TCMP, its fee structure and financial systems. This involved a collaborative process between the TCMP team and financing expert Dr. Ramón de León with in-depth consultation about the MPA legal framework, the nature of visitation, the user fee structure and the MPA's financial procedures. It also required an understanding of the MPA's IT capabilities, the day-to-day operational workings of the park and the capacity and training of field staff.

In parallel with getting the system up and running from a technical stand-point, TCMP received support in stakeholder consultation, communications and marketing of the system. This included integration of the system into the park's website and social media, and the promotion links to the system from other relevant websites. It also involved a stage of general information sharing via national press and national and regional tourism-related channels. A further stage of one-on-one information sharing about the new system was held with key industry stakeholders. Finally, after about 18 months of work, the system was formally launched in 2022 as 'TCMP Pay' at a hybrid face-to-face and virtual ceremony. Most recently, Content Cay is helping TCMP to enhance its social media.

The online fee payment system generates virtual receipts to the fee-paying visitors which the park rangers view and check in the field. The rangers can also review a list of boat names generated from the system to check against those present in the park. Additional IT capability was required in both the head office and the field for implementation of the system, so additional computing equipment and phones/tablets were provided to TCMP through grant support. TCMP Pay has been operating since the 2023 high season and there is gradual uptake by fee-paying visitors which is anticipated to increase with more marketing and outreach effort by TCMP.

Take-away messages for MPA managers

Increasing efficiency. By simplifying fee collection to the verification of receipts and/or a check of boats present against names in the fee system records, daily field operations can become simpler and more rapid. Note that this easing of the fee collection burden does not remove the need for field patrols. However it can mean that rangers have more time available for core MPA activities related to enforcement, education/outreach, scientific monitoring and restoration.

Reducing risks. The online fee payment system has benefits for enhancing field officer security and reducing loss of cash in the system.

Increasing revenue. By offering credit cards as an additional method for fee payment, fee collection is expected to increase slightly. When marketed widely, including in the languages of visitors to TCMP, and once search-engine optimized, greater compliance with fee payment is expected to further increase MPA revenue.

Quality of service is critical. The payment of user fees is more readily accepted when the use of the funds is made clear and is trusted. In the case of TCMP, fixed moorings are a key component of the revenue generated from user fees and TCMP works to ensure that moorings are well-installed, well-maintained and frequently inspected according to best practice standard operating procedures. As funds for more

capital investment accrue, TCMP aims to invest in improved visitor facilities such as eco-friendly washrooms. Effective communications are needed to share about this work and promote the quality of the park infrastructure for which visitors are paying.

Achieving sustainable financing demands effective and strategic communications. In the case of TCMP Pay, marketing is critical in effectively implementing this new online system. The extent of consultation about the new system and the importance of launch publicity demonstrates that it takes a village to support a marine park. Private sector partners in the tourism industry have been especially important for their interest in and support for the implementation of the new system. Implementing an online fee system Visitors and stakeholders

MPA communications in turn stand to benefit from the generation of a visitor database. TCMP Pay can generate a valuable database of visitors to the park with information about visitor interests. This enables communications staff to share information about the application of fees to MPA management and programs. It also brings potential for TCMP to make calls to action among visitors who know the park, such as seeking donations or raising crowd-funding for important initiatives.

Implementing an online fee payment system is an opportunity to focus on more strategic and intelligence-driven enforcement. Fee collection patrols typically provide a basic level of field officer presence in an MPA which helps ensure some compliance with regulations. Rather than reduce field officer staff numbers or effort as fee collection becomes more efficient, the opportunity is to invest in random spot-checks, after-hours patrols, to work with local enforcement agencies and respond to intelligence, and to conduct more interpretive enforcement in order to educate users about regulations and build voluntary compliance.

Communicate at every opportunity about application of the fees for MPA management, the investment in community programs and benefit sharing. Ensure that MPA marketing and communications share messages about the role of fees in sustainable financing for the important work that the MPA does in protecting coral reefs, sea turtles, nursery habitat for conch and other commercially important species.

Lessons for sharing about MPA management capacity

Ensure the non-negotiables are in place. These include: the necessary legal framework to support fee collection and re-investment in the MPA; credible MPA financial planning and management, standard operating procedures, transparency, auditing, public financial reporting; re-investment of MPA revenue in MPA management objectives as approved in management planning and organizational strategic planning.

Site-specific support for the implementation of an online fee payment system is needed. Implementing an online fee payment system is not just a matter of plug-and-play using an existing system, rather time and effort is needed to adapt the settings and the system to each MPA. Sharing by mentors has a role to play – other MPA managers from across the region are following TCMP Pay progress with keen interest. Expert guidance is needed in the process of establishing an online MPA fee payment system.

Capacity building in communications and marketing to complement efforts in sustainable financing.

Annex 1

Tobago Cays Marine Park – MPAConnect

Date	Location	MPAConnect Capacity Building and Networking Activities	P2P	Grant/ Technical Support
Sustainable financing				
2019	Provo, TCI	Peer-to-peer Workshop on MPA Sustainable Financing	1	
2019	St Vincent and the Grenadines	Mentorship on MPA Financial Planning and Budgeting		1
2020	St Vincent and the Grenadines	Implementation of Online Fee Payment System		1
2023	St Vincent and the Grenadines	Follow-Up Support for Online Fee Payment System		1
2023	Saint Lucia	Peer-to-peer Workshop on MPA Sustainable Financing	1	
Law enforcement				
2012	Key West, USA	Peer-to-peer Workshop on Enforcement and Building Compliance for Caribbean MPAs	1	
2014	St Vincent and the Grenadines	MPA Law Enforcement Assessment and Practical Enforcement Training		1
2015	Regional	Review of Legal Framework for MPA Enforcement		1
Outreach/education				
2019	St Vincent and the Grenadines	Sharing TIDE's Community Researcher Program with the Grenadines Network of MPAs	1	
2023	Remote	Social Media Strategy		1
Bio-physical monitoring/Stony coral tissue loss disease				
2012	US Virgin Islands	NOAA Coral Health/Water Quality Monitoring Workshop		1
2016	Carriacou, Grenada	Peer-to-Peer Field Workshop Bio-Physical Monitoring for Caribbean MPAs: Linking Knowledge to Action	1	
2020	St Vincent and the Grenadines	Monitoring for SCTLTD with the Community Researchers		1
Management planning				
2015	St Vincent and the Grenadines	Review and Updating of TCMP Management Plan		1
Total			5	9