

Guardians of the Sea celebrates one year in Sal island with the addition of 15 new boats to the citizen science programme.

15 February 2021 – This week marked the introduction of an additional 15 new boats to the Guardians of the Sea programme in Sal Island, a citizen science initiative designed to empower fishers and fishing communities of Sal to take a leading role in protecting the marine resources that are essential to their income and livelihoods.

After nearly nine months of workshops, trainings and engagement activities, 25 boats and over 40 fishers from the communities of Santa Maria, Palmeira and Pedra de Lume, are now fully equipped to play an essential part in local marine conservation efforts, as well as support better management of the island's artisanal fisheries.

Supported through funding from CEPF and the Global Environmental Facility's Small Grants Programme, Guardians of the Sea places fishers on the front lines of monitoring and data collection, including identification of marine megafauna species and illegal fishing infractions.

Participating fishers have spent the last 9 months recording the programme's initial set of data, which reflect the wide array of marine species diversity in the area, as well as the threats faced as a result of illegal fishing activity. The team recorded 100 sightings of various marine species including seabirds, whales and dolphins. Fishers also reported 23 fishing infractions, including semi-industrial boats fishing within a protected area and bottle diving, which are both prohibited by law.

The sightings of marine megafauna will help biologists fill the knowledge gap regarding their distribution and abundance in Sal. At the same time, this will allow the authorities to evaluate the suitability of the Marine Protected Areas and to identify potential new areas, as well as design new strategies to protect marine biodiversity.

On the other side, reporting infractions is showing a better picture of the real state of local fisheries and, therefore, can be translated to control actions. As per today, some of the reports have led to direct actions from the authorities that have intervened some illegal fishing activities.

Finally, the empowering of the fishers is resulting in a more aware and participating community, that is taking part in other activities such as underwater cleanings and workshops, in some case leading its organization.

In addition to programme implementation and training, Project Biodiversity has been working to raise the visibility of fishers and fish workers on Sal through a series of video spotlights and publications reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of those whose livelihood depends on access to fisheries and their resources.

To celebrate this milestone, 39 Guardians of the Sea and their families joined Project Biodiversity this past Sunday at Santa Maria's Pachamama Eco-Park where the team unveiled the most recent data collected by the fishers as well as showcased different fishers' stories chronicled over the last year.