

**Fishing Vessel Circular Letter No. 063**

**08 December 2023**

**Series: GEN-2023**

To: All Ship Owners, Operators, Deputy Registrars, Resident Agents, Representatives, and other Stakeholders

Subject: **CONSERVATION OF MOBULID RAYS**

Reference: Issued in accordance with Part VIII, Section 50(1)(c) of the High Seas Fishing Act, 2013

Circular Superseded: FVC-020/2017, Issued 18<sup>th</sup> May 2017

**BACKGROUND**

Conservation efforts for Mobulid Rays have gained significant attention in recent years due to the alarming decline in their populations. Mobulid Rays, which include species such as manta rays and devil rays, are large filter-feeding rays found in oceans worldwide. These gentle giants face various threats, including targeted fishing for their gill plates (known as gill rakers) and incidental capture in fisheries targeting other species.

The gill plates of Mobulid Rays are highly sought after in some markets for their perceived medicinal properties. This demand has led to overfishing and unsustainable harvesting practices, which pose a significant risk to these ray populations. Additionally, Mobulid Rays often get entangled in fishing gear, resulting in accidental bycatch and subsequent mortality.

**MANAGEMENT MEASURES**

1. Operators of Belize licensed fishing vessels shall prohibit retaining on board, transshipping, landing, storing, selling, or offering for sale any part or whole carcass of Mobulid Rays caught in fishing activities.

2. Operators shall ensure to release all Mobulid Rays alive where possible. In the case of Mobulid Rays that are intentionally caught and frozen as part of purse seine vessel operations, the vessel must surrender the whole Mobulid Ray to the responsible government authority at the point of landing.
3. Operators shall promptly release unharmed, to the extent possible, Mobulid Rays as soon as they are seen in the net, on the hook or on the deck and do it in a manner that will result in the least possible harm to the Mobulid Rays captured, without compromising the safety of any persons in accordance with guidance indicated in Annex 1 of this Circular.
4. Operators shall ensure to include in their monthly reports, the number of discards and releases of Mobulid Rays, indicating its status (dead or alive)

### **APPLICABILITY**

Circulars setting out mandatory requirements shall be construed to have the same effect and applicability of rules and policies under the provisions of the HSFA 2013. Each circular is applicable to all Belize flagged fishing vessels engaged in fishing and related activities. The owner, operator and master of every Belize flagged fishing vessel shall be familiar with all applicable Circulars applying to their vessel and it shall be no defense that any person in breach of any Circular was not aware of it or has not been advised of it.

### **MAINTENANCE**

Ship owners, and operators shall ensure that all Circulars are disseminated to their master and crew as well as any other person affected by or having an interest in the subject matter in a language understood by all. A Circular once issued shall be disseminated electronically to all stakeholders and a listing of ALL Circulars shall be published on the BHSFU website [www.bhsfu.gov.bz](http://www.bhsfu.gov.bz) for future reference.

### **COMPLIANCE AND ENFORCEMENT**

Failure to comply with any Circular shall result in disciplinary actions taken in accordance with Belize's Sanction Regulations S.I. 32 of 2014

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

This circular shall take effect immediately.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information direct all inquiries about this Circular to the Director of High Seas Fisheries of the Belize High Seas Fisheries Unit, Ministry of Finance, Government of Belize.

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Issued by

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## ANNEX 1

### GUIDELINES FOR THE SAFE HANDLING AND RELEASE OF MOBULID RAYS

1. When encountering a Mobulid Ray, it is important to minimize stress for the animal. Approach the ray calmly and avoid making sudden movements or loud noises. Keep a safe distance to prevent crowding or causing the rays to panic.
2. If handling a Mobulid Ray is necessary, use appropriate gear such as gloves and a soft, non-abrasive net or sling. This will help protect both the handler and the ray from injuries.
3. When lifting or carrying a Mobulid Ray, provide support to its body to avoid placing excessive stress on its pectoral fins or tail. Use both hands to cradle the ray, ensuring a secure and gentle grip.
4. Mobulid Rays have delicate gill plates that should not be touched or handled. These structures are sensitive and can be easily damaged, which may affect the ray's ability to feed and survive.
5. Mobulid Rays are adapted to life in the water and require a constant flow of oxygen. Minimize the time the ray spends out of the water to prevent respiratory distress. If necessary, use a wet towel or cloth to keep the ray's body moist during handling.
6. If Mobulid rays is accidentally caught on a fishing line or has ingested a hook, take immediate action to remove the gear. Use proper tools, such as long-nose pliers to carefully remove the hook, taking care not to injure the ray or yourself in the process.
  - Prohibit the gaffing of rays.
  - Prohibit lifting rays by the gill slits or spiracles.
  - Prohibit the punching of holes through the bodies of rays (e.g. to pass a cable through for lifting of rays).
  - Require that to the extent possible, rays too large to be lifted by hand be brailed out of the net.
  - Require that large rays that cannot be released safely before being landed on deck, be returned to the water as soon as possible, preferably utilizing a ramp from the deck connecting to an opening on the side of the boat, or if no such ramp is available, lowered with a sling or net.
7. When releasing a Mobulid Ray, gently lower it back into the water, allowing it to swim freely. Avoid forcefully pushing or throwing the ray, as this can cause unnecessary stress or injury.
8. If you encounter a Mobulid ray that is injured, entangled, or showing signs of distress, document the details, such as the location, time, and any visible injuries. Report the sighting or incident to the local authorities, marine conservation organizations or research institutions that specialize in Mobulid ray conservation. This information can contribute to ongoing research and conservation efforts.