

National Conservation Council Guidance Notes on the Legal Handling of Stingrays

Introduction

A key purpose of the National Conservation Act, and a function of the National Conservation Council, is to promote and secure biological diversity and the sustainable use of natural resources in the Cayman Islands. Cayman's Southern Stingrays, particularly those found at Stingray City and the Sandbar in Grand Cayman's North Sound, are invaluable natural resources for the Cayman Islands.

Under the National Conservation Act, stingrays (southern stingrays, *Dasyatis americana*, *Hypanus americanus*) are a Part 1 listed species (under the Subclass Elasmobranchii) with all other sharks and rays found in Cayman waters. This means that they are protected from take at all times. Under the National Conservation Act, 2013, "take" means to collect, hunt, kill, destroy, damage, injure, disturb, harass, harm, wound, capture, molest or impede a live specimen in any way or to attempt to do so, and includes incidental "taking". For the avoidance of doubt, an individual holding a live stingray, or attempting to do so, would count as "take" under the National Conservation Act, 2013.

Stingray City and the Sandbar are Protected Areas under the National Conservation Act by virtue of being a marine park (specifically and hereafter referred to as Wildlife Interaction Zones, or WIZs). The WIZs were set up to manage human interaction with wildlife, particularly the stingrays, as such interactions are not allowed anywhere else in Cayman waters. To allow this interaction to continue in a manner that protects the health of the stingrays and promotes the sustainable use of these natural resources of the Cayman Islands, the following Guidance Notes are issued.

These Guidance Notes are issued by the National Conservation Council under section 3(12) of the National Conservation Act and enforced under regulation 7(2)(a) of the National Conservation (Marine Park) Regulations which allow persons to "engage in wildlife interaction in accordance with any orders, guidance notes or Directives issued by the Council." These guidance notes apply to all persons, private or commercial, entering the WIZs.

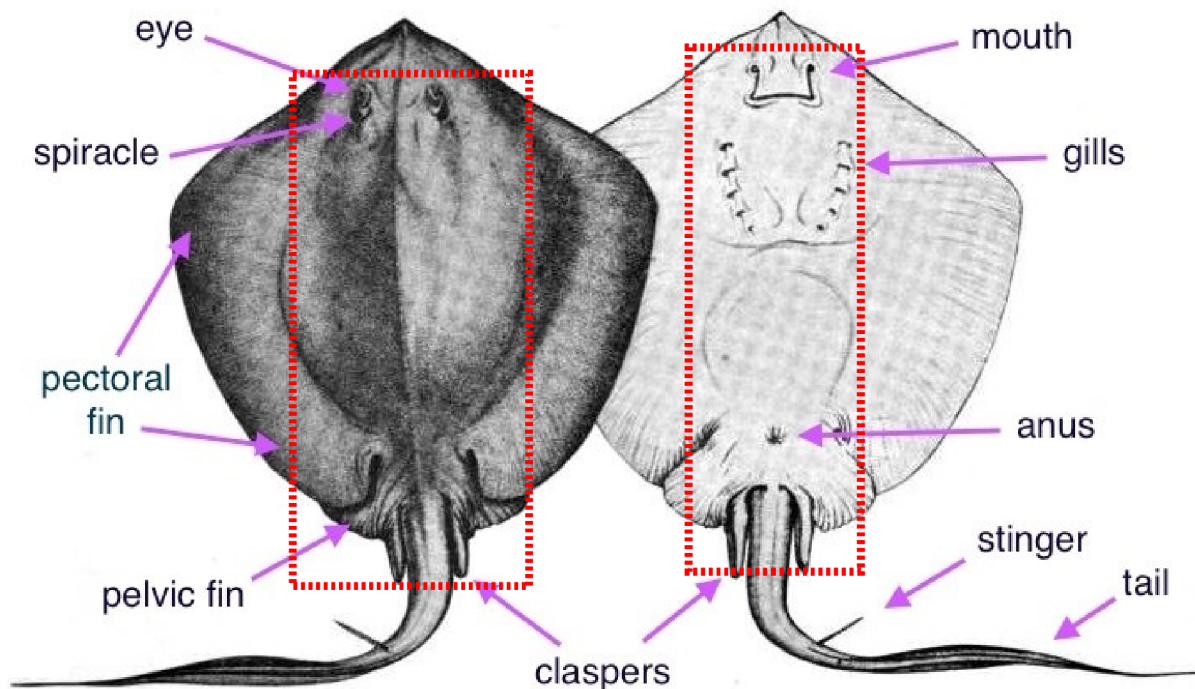
The DoE consulted with experts in elasmobranch physiology during the drafting process and referenced the "Elasmobranch Husbandry Manual", 2004, by Smith, Warmolts, Thoney and Hueter (Eds.).

Stingray Handling Best Practices

The stingrays at the Sandbar and Stingray City provide a unique and enjoyable experience for both tourists and residents, so it is essential that care is taken to keep our stingrays healthy and happy, if we wish to continue enjoying these areas for wildlife interaction. No animal deserves to be abused through mishandling, even if accidental or for just a short period of time.

The following guidelines highlight general best practices to ensure that stingrays are handled safely, that no injuries occur to animal or human, that vital areas are not impeded or obstructed, and that the stingray is free to end an interaction at any time if it so desires.

Stingray diagram highlighting 'no touch' areas in red boxes



¹

The areas noted in the above illustrations are vital and/or contain sensitive organs and should never be touched when handling.

Reef Safe Sunscreen

Apply sunscreen well in advance of handling or interacting with any marine life, including stingrays. Always use reef safe sunscreen with zinc oxide or titanium dioxide and non-nano particles. Other active ingredients in sunscreens such as oxybenzone may be toxic or otherwise stressful to marine life, including stingrays, starfish and corals, even in very low concentrations.

¹ Wikimedia Commons [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dasyatis_say_njasm_\(annotated\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dasyatis_say_njasm_(annotated).jpg)

Approved Interactions

Department of Environment Conservation Officers will apply their discretion and not consider the following activities as “take” under the law:

- ▶ Positioning stingrays flat in the water, supported by a person, e.g., arms bent at the elbows and extended in front of the person’s body, as long as the stingray is not gripped or bent in any significant way (see prohibited interactions below).

Best Practice Stingray should be positioned so that its nose is towards the person supporting the stingray. This leaves the tail relatively clear for safety while allowing others to view the stingray or touch its wings (pectoral fins) safely. The handler can also easily move with the stingray cradled in this manner, extending the period of interaction without gripping the stingray in such a way that it cannot end the interaction if it desires.

- ▶ Physical interaction such as petting, touching, or rubbing the upper or lower (underside) areas of the wings (pectoral fins) of the stingray is allowed. This includes by other individuals when a stingray is positioned on another person’s arms, or as the stingray passes by.

The upper or lower (underside) midline of the stingray should never be touched.

Best Practice The slight angling of the stingray in the water to allow just the nose (area of the stingray before but not including the mouth, spiracles or eyes) to rise above or out of the plane of the water for physical interaction with a person, is allowed.


- ▶ "Hands off" observations are especially suitable for interactions at Stingray City WIZ.


Kissing & Cradling a Stingray


Stingray cradled, eyes and spiracles fully submerged





Prohibited Interactions


-  Any **elevation** of the stingray which causes the spiracles, eyes, mouth or gills to be held out of the water will be considered “take”

-  **Bending** any part of the stingray in any direction, whether bending their back or bending/curling their wings (flaps or pectoral fins), claspers, etc., will be considered “take”.

-  **Gripping** the stingray’s fins to immobilize (impede their movement) will be considered “take”.

-  Physical **interaction with the upper or lower midline** of the stingray, the areas of their body within the red box indicated previously, will be considered “take”.
 - See bottom right picture where our model is holding the stingray at the base of the tail as an example of a midline grip that is not allowed.

-  Holding the stingray in such a way that their wing (**flap or pectoral fin**) **slaps against the body** of a person, e.g., a back-slap, will be considered “take”.

-  **The 'back slap' or 'back massage' is no longer allowed**



Conclusion

These guidelines were prepared to ensure the public understands how the National Conservation Act protects stingrays in the Cayman Islands to ensure they are treated safely and respectfully, and so the attraction remains sustainable for many years to come.

Additional Resources

Click links to access

[Background Information for Guidance Notes](#)

DoE Stingray information page and handling video produced by the Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation (GHOF) in collaboration with the Department of Environment (DoE)

www.doe.ky/stingrays

NCC Legislation page with the National Conservation Act & Regulations including the Marine Parks Regulations

www.conservation.ky/the-national-conservation-law

Reporting Suspicious Activity

Anyone who witnesses activity they feel is in violation of these Guidance Notes is encouraged to report this to the Department of Environment as soon as possible by calling 916-4271 or emailing DoE@gov.ky.

If possible, please take a photo or video of the observed activity noting the date, time, and location. Additional information about the suspected offender is also essential and can include the name of vessel, company, and/or persons involved. DoE Conservation Officers will then assess the information and determine how to address the situation.

If providing a photo or video please ensure:

- The image is clear
- Time, date and location data is embedded in the picture's metadata if possible

All information regarding suspected marine offences provided to the DoE will be kept strictly confidential. Consequences for offenses may include the suspension or revocation of a commercial operator's WIZ permit, or prosecution under the National Conservation Act.