

## HEPCA defends Thistlegorm closure

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The decision to close one of the world's most famous wrecks for one month while preservation work is carried out has been defended by the Hurghada Environmental Protection Conservation Association (HEPCA). HEPCA's diving team has already begun work to put a new buoy mooring system in place on the northern Red Sea wreck of the Thistlegorm as part of the Saving the Red Sea Wrecks project.

Mooring points and separate descent and ascent lines are being set up to ease pressure caused by vessels mooring on the wreck in high winds and strong current. A series of holes are also being drilled into the main structure of the wreck to allow divers' trapped air bubbles to escape and prevent corrosion.

However, HEPCA has come under fire for its decision to close the wreck by a handful of diving operators. In a hard-hitting letter to the diving community this week, HEPCA chairman Amr Ali defended the project, calling uncooperative operators 'irresponsible' and 'greedy'.

'Many diving operators consider the closure of the Thistlegorm unpractical and have voiced their objections,' Ali said. 'However, the fact remains that we are losing this wreck and many others.'

'HEPCA is fed up with the continued resistance for change. We are fed up of being asked to defend and apologise for our actions that are merely the last resort in a battle that has been going on for years to ensure the future sustainability of our Red Sea.'

Ali also pointed the finger of blame at boat operators for the recent collapse of the mast from the wreck of the Rosalie Muller. The northern Egyptian Red Sea wreck is another site marked out as a priority for protection by the Saving the Red Sea Wrecks scheme.

'Only a few weeks ago the magnificent rear mast was upright and many a diver enjoyed diving around it,' added Ali. 'Over the years, many liveboard operators have opted to tie their boats to the top of the mast. Now, alas, the mast is no longer standing in its majestic form.'

'What fell down was the remaining respect that these liveboard operators, dive guides and divers held for our Red Sea. What also fell down was any final shared sense of responsibility, team work and credibility.'

Ali said it was the responsibility of the diving community to prevent further damage to such dives sites. He also said it was vital that new mooring systems 'made sense' and would not endanger divers, wrecks or reefs.

The Thistlegorm is set to open to divers again on 15 December.