

Blue Water Pacific

by Tim Rock

The beauty of the coral reefs is one of the major attractions in the Pacific's travel industry. Snorkelers, divers and sun worshippers flock to locales with healthy and diverse reefs to explore the amazing world of the coral kingdom. But more people are looking beyond the reef. This blue water region is the realm of ocean's large inhabitants. Whales, dolphins, manta rays, sharks, ocean sunfish and other pelagics are becoming more and more sought by traveling naturalists and adventurers. Some are fish and some are water-borne mammals. People want to see them, track their movements, photograph them and understand how they live in the open sea. They do this through land-based excursions out to sea and also through extended live aboard trips ranging in price from US\$2,000 to US\$20,000 per trip.

Getting to know the world of the deep blue is a complex task. Guides must understand things like migration patterns, deep undersea terrain, currents, food supplies, moon phases and myriad more factors. These all combine to allow people to be able to observe creatures rarely seen in the wild, but an important part of the chain of the sea. This is an important industry that generates new revenues for island people. But, it pits fishing and whaling interests against those of environmental tourism. This has escalated with advances in consumer technology. What was once the realm of science is now the realm of hi tech fishing and top-flight tourism.



A mola-mola gets cleaned by a variety of fish off Nusa Penida in Indonesia. Nikon D100 in Aquatica housing, 10.5mm lens, Ikelite DS125 strobes.

The warm waters of the Pacific make observation easier in that people can spend longer time on and in the water and heighten the chance of seeing a blue water creature. Tonga and Hawaii are gaining great fame as a place to observe humpback whales when they come to certain "grounds" to have their young and mate.

Humpback whales are known for their complex vocalizations that sound like singing and for their

acrobatic breaching. This can be spectacular as they lift nearly their entire bodies out of the water and crash back down to the sea. A breach can be many things. A warning. A way to attract a female. Play. It is incredible to see.

Before 1900, an estimated 15,000 humpbacks lived in the North Pacific, but the population was severely reduced by commercial whaling. In the 20th century, their estimated numbers reportedly



Whales at play include a breach shot with a Canon 20D and Sigma 80-400VR zoom, male whale and family unit both shot natural light using a Canon 20D in Aquatica housing, 10-22mm lens.

dwindled to fewer than 1,000. An international ban on commercial whaling was instituted in 1964, but humpbacks are still endangered. Between 5,000 and 7,500 humpbacks are left in the world's oceans, and many of those survivors migrate to Hawaii and Tonga, where commercial boats do day trips to see these amazing big mammals.

The dollar value of a whale cannot be estimated, but they are known to return annually to breeding grounds and some seem to actually enjoy entertaining tourists with their aquabatics. While hunting now would seem out of the question, there are those who want to resume whaling even though it has been proven whales are more profitable alive than dead. Supporters say "whales should be seen, not hurt". The 65-day period in the Dominican Republic when the whales pass through, brings in more than US\$15 million in direct and indirect revenue annually. The economic bonanza happens in places like Kona and Maui in the Pacific's Hawaii.

The International Whaling Commission has been established to watch the populations of whales worldwide (and also dolphins) and declare bans and quotas on marine mammals. Pro-whaling countries like Japan and Iceland support a pro-whaling agenda that threaten some whale species. But they are meeting with more and more international resistance as more sustainable uses for whales are being discovered. The pro-whaling nations need a 75% majority at the IWC to formally scrap the current worldwide moratorium and resume commercial whaling. Still they persevere, sometimes through threats of economic boycott to smaller Pacific countries. The list of countries voting in favour of overturning the moratorium makes for interesting reading as many of them are small African, Caribbean and Pacific nations with minimal whaling interests.

Observers note that Japan has spent millions in grant aid for fisheries development in some Pacific countries, implying that votes are being bought.

This allegation is strongly denied by the Japanese who point to their desire to see managed whaling based on scientific knowledge. Yet, Japanese funding certainly seems to be at the heart of the matter in the Pacific. Countries voting in favour of the most recent proposal to resume whale hunting include Japan, Kiribati, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu. Countries voting against the declaration include Australia, New Zealand and the USA. For now, it appears whales shall remain safe from whaling interests, but the tallies are still close.



Manta ray and diver in Yap's Gofnuw Channel shots with Canon 20D in Aquatica housing, 8mm Sigma AF lens, Ikelite DS125 strobes. Palau manta at Devilray City shot with Nikon D100 in Aquatica housing, 10.5mm lens, Ikelite DS125 Strobes.

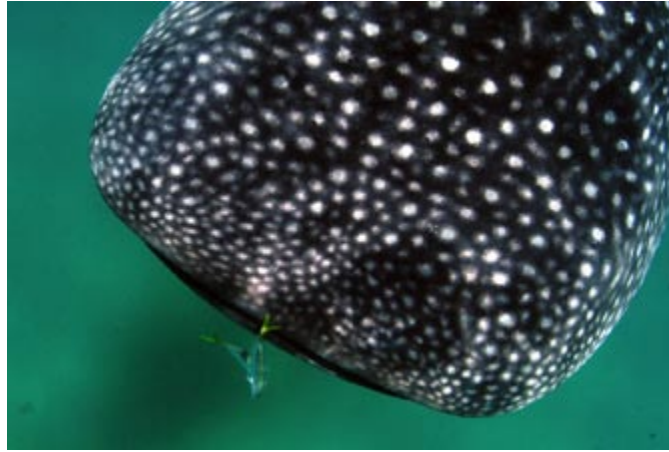
Some places in Micronesia like Yap, Palau and Pohnpei have become famous for having sites that feature superb viewing venues for manta rays. Yap has a series of cleaning stations and channels that mantas like to frequent. Adjacent to the open sea, these rays sometimes come in to the channels in large groups, allowing divers and ever snorkelers a chance to see a big ray really up close and personal. The Big Island of Hawaii also has a site off Kona

where mantas come in to feed on plankton drawn by shore-based lights. Divers watch this amazing feed on a nightly basis.

Another plankton eater is the whale shark, which is also seen in Hawaiian and Micronesian waters. The largest of the shark family, these big fish are harmless and can be enjoyed by snorkelers. But the Pacific hasn't developed a consistent site to view these fish. Because they are harmless,

and often curious and friendly towards swimmers, major tourism industries have developed around snorkeling and diving with these sharks in places like Exmouth in Western Australia where they come seasonally.

Fisheries in many countries have decimated populations of both mantas and whale sharks, yet few scientific studies have examined these threatened species. The Manta Ray and Whale



Whale sharks off the Mozambique Coast. Whale shark and snorkeler shot with Nikonos V and 15mm lens with Velvia film. Pilotfish on whale shark's nose shot with Canon 20D in Aquatica housing, 8mm Sigma AF lens and natural light. Far right: Galapagos sharks off Oahu shot with Canon 20D in Aquatica housing, 10-22mm Canon lens at 10mm and natural light.

Shark Trust is now conducting world-leading research on the ecology and conservation of mantas and whale sharks. Its scientific program examines issues directly related to both the continued survival of these species and the promotion of a sustainable tourism industry. As human pressures increase worldwide manta ray populations have declined in many areas where they were once common. There is a notable contrast between the few protected populations, such as in Yap and the Hawaiian Islands, where economically valuable ecotourism and dive operations exist and mantas seem to thrive.

This is not true out of the Pacific. Populations in areas where fisheries target the species, such as along the coast of Africa, South East Asia, and in Mexico. Mantas are highly vulnerable to over-fishing, and there looms a genuine threat of localized extinction of certain populations. The whale shark is also at risk. Even though tourism

attached to these fish can be worth upwards of US\$47.5 million annually within developing countries, fisheries still target whale sharks and mantas (sold as scallops) in several regions. This leads to fears about both the future of tourism and the species itself.

As manta rays and whale sharks are both large charismatic fish there has been extensive media interest, but nothing compares to the thrill of seeing big sharks in the wild.

Palau's Blue Corner, Yap's Vertigo Wall and Oahu's North Shore are all sites where shark diving has become an international attraction. On Oahu, the ships go far offshore, three miles to the "shark grounds", where the crystal clear water is 400 feet deep. Acclimatised by baiting, sharks arrive in response to the sound of the boat engine. A sturdy cage is lowered and people don snorkels and clamber in. It's quite a scene as big, curious

gray fishes with toothy smiles can come in real close. The cage bars are close together and large, Plexiglas windows are nearly transparent and a full quarter-inch thick so people can safely and easily see some amazing gatherings of sharks. Hard to see creatures like the 10-14 foot long Galapagos shark press against the glass. There are also smaller sandbar sharks, and on rare occasions, tiger sharks, grey reef sharks and hammerheads. Occasionally,



- Galapagos sharks off Oahu shot with Canon 20D in Aquatica housing, 10-22mm Canon lens at 10mm and natural light.

dolphins escort the boat out to the shark grounds and back. During the winter the massive Pacific humpback whales are often seen. Seeing the sharks is like living in the Discovery Channel. It is a popular attraction that wows almost everyone that gives it a try. So much so that a couple of North Shore operators run several trips daily and cater to ages 7 to 70. They say everyone from housewives to Hollywood actors have been guests.

In the dive areas like Palau and Yap, the sharks have become

somewhat accustomed to divers and grey reef sharks patrol their natural hunting grounds, often swimming close to see what divers are up to. They are generally afraid of divers, who blow scuba bubbles and make noise. But they come close enough to thrill those who don't know the sharks are afraid.

But it may be the shark's image as a fearless predator that hurts it as much as helps. In reality, humans kill an estimated 100 millions sharks per year. In the same year sharks kill only

seven humans. At this rate, sharks cannot reproduce fast enough to keep up with their slaughter. Fins taken for the high-demand shark fin soup in Asia come from a huge amount of sharks, mostly through illegal worldwide fisheries. Many nations, like Indonesia and The Philippines, are already considered fished (sharked) out.

In Micronesia, there are licensed fishing vessels but also much offshore unloading of catch to mother ships. Thus, the very few officials charged with regulating the catch have virtually no power or resources to oversee the catch, even of licensed vessels.

Unregulated fishing for fins is a cartel business generating millions of dollars. In 2005, Australia alone confiscated 216 ships and stripped another 242 of equipment and catch. The demand for fins is so great worldwide that the need to protect tourism dollars may not be reason enough to deflate this rogue industry. But tiny Palau is trying.

As Palau's major claim to fame is its amazing sheer underwater dropoffs and schooling sharks in the south that attract scuba buffs from all over the world, Palau's President Tommy Remengesau has spearheaded a movement to ban shark fishing throughout the Indo-Pacific. He has confiscated finning boats and set fire

to pyres of shark fins, vowing that no one shall profit from the exploitation and taking from Palau waters of these valuable food chain members. He has encouraged other nations in the Pacific and Asia to follow suit. For these efforts, Palau was recognized as Shark Guardian of the Year in 2004.

Yet, political forces have undermined efforts here as well. The nation has created powerful laws. They call for fines of up to \$250,000 per incident, per day, when "any part of any shark, turtle or ray" is found on any foreign fishing vessel. In one incident, that would have meant fines for one vessel of US\$24 million. Yet, while confiscations do take place, these fines have never been levied. Those familiar with the cases say political favors interfere with the cases and they never appear in court or just get a slap instead of the intended wallop the law intends.

The world of the blue water, the open sea, is one that is still barely understood. The science of how its residents live and what they need to survive is in its infancy and may be playing catch-up to insulated fishing interests. The future of whales, many shark species, big rays and other amazing blue water creatures may well hinge on the money the eco-tourist's generate to observe them alive in the blue Pacific.

Tips for big blue photos:

Whales:

Breaching and playing whales require a good camera that can shoot a lot of photos quickly in one burst



and write them to cache. While I used a Canon 20D with power grip and 80-400 Sigma Optical Stabilizer zoom for these photos at 3.5 frames per second, the same lens on a Canon EOS 1D Mark II would have yielded me 8 frames per second and 8 MB files at that. An investment in a good, fast body is essential in getting good results if you are going to do this kind of photography a lot. The same goes for leaping dolphins and other aerial marine displays, like those of mobula.

Mantas:

Find the right place where they come to feed, clean or mate. A 10-22 or 12-24 lens is magic. Just be very patient and they will come close. Don't chase them. It may be the last you see of them. Use strobes to fill so the white of the ray's belly is evenly lit. I use Ikelite DS125 strobes for this kind of shooting at quarter to half power.



Sharks:

Many shark feeds take place close to the surface. While it may appear a strobe isn't necessary, a small pair of DS50s or similar strobe certainly help with minor fill. It can be tricky to place the strobe just right so that scatter from the bait doesn't snow up the photo. Those feeds that occur deeper require DS125s or similar strobe. A 17-35 lens or even a 50mm work well for sharks unless they are right up on your dome. Many pros rig up a "pole cam", which is a contraption that allows you to save your fingers by dipping your camera into the fray of sharks and remotely trigger it.



Molas:

South Africa's west coast, the California coast and Lembongan Island near Bali are prime mola spot when they migrate. A 10-22 or 12-24 is fine here. These are skittish fish so approach slowly. They also don't like strobes much, so use very low power and set your aperture accordingly or it is easy to scare them.



Tim Rock

www.doubleblue.com

Shootunderwater.com Seminars for 2007

What:

Learn How To Photograph Reefs, Macro and More



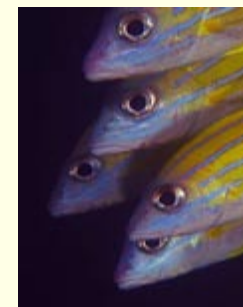
Where:

Four 2007 venues to include the newly renovated Manta Ray Bay Hotel/Yap Divers in Micronesia, Palau's incredible dropoffs with dive pioneer Fish N Fins, rustic Scuba Seraya Resort/Bali Hai Dive adventures in eastern Bali and the beautiful El Galleon Resort/Asia Divers in Puerto Galera, Oriental Mindoro, Philippines.



Why:

Because you want to improve your underwater skills and have fun doing it. We have selected the perfect undersea studios.



Who:

Pros Tim Rock and Mike Veitch with special guest pro Simon Buxton.

www.shootunderwater.com