

Stormclouds over Eden

by Wade and Robyn Hughes

Thunderclouds, and the first pelting raindrops of a tropical deluge, blocked our view as we approached the islands of Raja Ampat in the Ceram Sea.

Ahead, in this eastern-most region of Indonesia, awaited reefs that comprise more than 500 species of corals - more than 60 per cent of all known coral species on Earth.

Around 1100 species of fish are known to inhabit these reefs. Likely, more are yet to be discovered. Countless other life-forms bejewel the underwater eco-system. The area is truly a sea of Eden. But for how long?

After the United Arab Emirates, this is one of the world's major sources of shark-fins. Fuelled by the ignorant belief that shark fins are somehow nutritious, hold magical powers, or are even flavoursome - none of which is true - Asian markets pay high prices to middle-men who in turn pay subsistence wages to reward local fishermen who scour their reefs for sharks and rays. Dynamite fishing - wasteful, catastrophic and inefficient adds more relentless pressure to the reefs.

The result is mindless

extermination of the sea's essential apex predators, systematic destruction of the marine web of life on which they depend - and on which so many people depend for food. Ignorance and poverty are perpetuating the impoverishment of people, and the marine environment.

But, at Misool, in the islands of Raja Ampat, the clouds are lifting.

Often, what is perceived as an Earthly paradise is simply a picturesque mask, shrouding from view the impoverishment of the underlying eco-system. Such is the case globally as humans everywhere change, exploit, and extract from the natural environment the resources we need for nourishment, shelter, and material advancement. How much we should take is often a question left to Nature. When there is nothing left to give, we move on in search of easier pickings. Picture postcard views of cherished landscapes - for examples, the Norfolk Broads, the New Zealand Alps, Australia's South West, the Greek Isles, Chesapeake Bay, and the idyllic islands of the Pacific and the Caribbean - all serve to distract us with their sunlight and gloss from the painful reality that their



Trawlers at Sorong, on the western tip of Papua, reflect the realities of life in developing economies.

Scant resources are available for securing the basics of life for the people within these economies. Little or nothing can be devoted to improvement in the quality of life, and the development and maintenance of the knowledge, skills, infrastructure and systems necessary for supporting it. Inevitably, as a consequence, the environment suffers as it sinks in priority against the more urgent need to provide food.

Just four hours by boat from Sorong, Misool, has created an economic base on which local communities can restructure their small society to sustainably exploit their environment, create a role model for similar initiatives elsewhere, and work towards a better future for themselves. We are all part of the environmental problems confronting planet Earth.

At places like Misool, for the time spent there, it is possible to start becoming part of the solution.



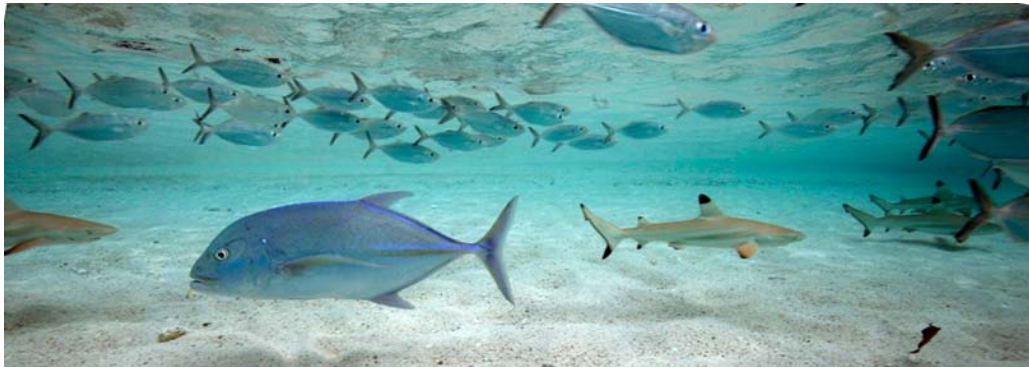
Surveying the past; swimming into the future: big-eye jacks patrol over what was once a productive staghorn coral reef demolished by dynamite fishing. (Right) Chain link fencing, an inexpensive, effective means of stabilising dynamited such rubble-slopes and encouraging regrowth of corals. While Robyn (Bottom right) swims over a test bed designed to monitor establishment and regrowth rates of hard and soft corals. Under, and around, the test bed, fish and invertebrate marine life gather in dense profusion. Altogether, this simple tableau offers a degree of reassurance that, given a place to call home and respite from over exploitation, the natural fecundity of the sea is capable of generating substantial recovery and repair.

natural abundance has been denuded.

At Misool Eco Resort, in the archipelago of Raja Ampat, Western Papua, Indonesia, the pattern of exploitation is changing. What was a shark-finner's beach camp, is

now an exclusive resort, bringing to the local economy a steady stream of employment, revenue, and opportunity previously unavailable to the islanders. The resort lies in the heart of a 1200 square kilometre





Baby black tip reef sharks, like excited, ambitious, but uncoordinated puppies, dash about, snapping up scraps left by jack-attacks on schools of baitfish in the shallow waters off Misool's protected beach. Whelped here, in the relative security of the bay, the sharks will spend a year, growing in the company of their siblings, before heading for the open reefs. There, they will hunt and swim, without rest, for their entire lives. (Below) Robyn (153) plays Gulliver to the Lilliputian sharks.



marine sanctuary, leased from and policed by, the locals themselves. The motivation is simple and effective: the marine life is worth more alive than dead.

After four years' operations, the effects of this commitment to, an experiment in, economic, social, and environmental sustainable development, are already strikingly evident. Misool's reefs are alive with

some of the most prolific marine life in the world. Serious divers can come here and enjoy reasonably priced, and very well managed diving. Boat dives rotate through a variety of interesting and spectacular sites. But the house reef, an easy swim from the steps of most of the private Water Cottages is capable of supporting weeks of studious exploration and and photography in its own right.



Designed to conserve and recycle resources, while offering comfort and privacy, and enviable access to prolific coral reefs, the Misool Eco Resort justifies its claim to being sustainable development. Constructed largely from sustainably sourced and recycled material, the resort even captures and recycles nutrient from human waste through garden beds integrated into the architecture of each individual Water Cottage.

Snorkling in the lagoon is a delight in itself.

Although a turtle swims in search of food across an area of reef once devastated by dynamite fishing, even areas such as this are beginning to heal. It is a clear sign that humans, with the will and imagination to do so, can prosper in the midst of the biodiversity on which we all depend.

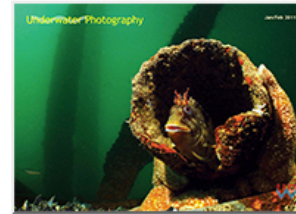
We are all part of the problems

facing planet Earth. We all consume natural resources, and exert pressure on the natural systems that create and provide them. At places like Misool, we can become part of the solution, and thoroughly enjoy doing so.

Wade and Robyn Hughes

Back issues

Just 99p per issue



Add Uwp58 to cart

Uwp58 — Jan/Feb 2011, 76 pages.

[Click to show or hide issue contents](#)



Add Uwp57 to cart

Uwp57 — Nov/Dec 2010, 85 pages.

[Click to show or hide issue contents](#)



Add Uwp56 to cart

Uwp56 — Sept/Oct 2010, 90 pages.

[Click to show or hide issue contents](#)



Add Uwp55 to cart

Uwp55 — July/Aug 2010, 75 pages.

[Click to show or hide issue contents](#)

As you know, the current issue of Underwater Photography is free to download but all of the previous issues, going right back to Issue 1, are still available to download for just 99p per issue.

It's a fantastic reference library chronicling all that has happened in underwater photography over the past 10 years.

Buy back issues
here

38^e FESTIVAL MONDIAL

DE L'IMAGE SOUS-MARINE



Lucretia ERRERA, Anna LO PINTO, Alessia TERESI, Andrea COSTA, Parthivra, Italie



PALAIS DU PHARO MARSEILLE

26-30 octobre 2011

SOUS LE PATRONAGE DE
LA FÉDÉRATION FRANÇAISE D'ÉTUDES ET DE SPORTS SOUS-MARINS



Festival : 1157, chemin de la Plaine - BP 1307 - 06255 Mougins Cedex, France. Tél +33 (0)4 93 61 45 45 - Fax +33 (0)4 93 67 34 93
info@underwater-festival.com - <http://www.underwater-festival.com>