

Burt Jones & Maurine Shimlock

by Duncan Whittaker

Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock have been taking photographs underneath the surface for over 30 years. They are the authors of Diving Indonesia's Raja Ampat (2009) and Diving Indonesia's Birds's Head Seascape (2011); 2 books that are partly responsible for developing tourism to the Papua region of Indonesia. UWP uncovers their fascinating story.

Out of everywhere you have visited, where were your three favourite locations for underwater photography?

MS – Raja Ampat for everything, especially wide angle. Lembah for critters and I really like the photography in the caves in Mexico.

BJ – Raja Ampat, Lembah, and I would say Cocos in Costa Rica for big animals.

So where did it all start?

BJ – I got certified to scuba dive in 1968 and immediately went to Mexico and started diving.

MS – I was writing a dissertation about Mexico and I quit school to run a dive shop.

BJ – She gave up a PhD to run a dive shop in a place that nobody had ever heard of! I grew up in Texas so Mexico was the closest exotic destination you could get to. When I was a child we drove there with my family so I had a fondness for Mexico and

Mexican food from a young age. I spent one year at university in Austin then dropped out and went down to Mexico to have a lot of fun. After a year I realised I couldn't make a living out of having fun so I went back to school. Here I figured out how to make a living out of having fun; open up a dive shop!

I lived on the Yucatan coast for four years before I met Maurine. During the winter we would get storms and we couldn't go out on boats because the wind was too strong, so we heard about these fresh water caves called cenotes. We started diving in them as an alternative place to take our customers when we couldn't go onto the reef. The cenotes became very popular as time went by and we were some of the first people to dive and work in them.

MS – All of this was before Cancun. There was none of that development. You have to imagine that all of that coast was 300 miles of reef and beaches with nothing on it. Jaguars used to come down to the beach and hunt at night and we would see them occasionally. They're all gone now but there are lots of hotels!

BJ – We haven't been back there in over 15 years because it's just depressing to us; what we had there is no longer available.

Where did you go next?

MS - The Solomon Islands in 1988. We



Flasher Wrasse, Triton Bay by Burt Jones
Nikon D 200 in Subal housing, 105mm lens, Inon D2000 strobes
F/10, 1/250th, ISO 200



were the first cruise directors on the Bilikiki which is still the only liveaboard that works out there.

How do the Solomon compare to Raja Ampat?

MS – The reef structure is different. There are a lot more walls and everything is a lot more vertical in the Solomons. The islands are volcanic and not uplifted like they are in Raja Ampat. In Raja Ampat there's not that much real deep water whereas there is in the Solomons. Also, the further away you get from Raja Ampat which is the epicentre of biodiversity in the coral triangle then you get species fall off. There's still a lot of species in the Solomons but it's not like Raja Ampat.

And after the Solomon Islands?

BJ – We went to the Solomons with the idea of becoming underwater photographers. We sold our place in Mexico and spent a lot of money on housings and cameras then went to the Solomons to teach ourselves how to do it. And that's what we did. We had this crazy idea that we could make a living out of underwater photography. So we went back to the States for 10 years. We set up a travel and photography business and were taking people on scuba and underwater photo safaris during that decade and the first place we went to outside of the Solomons was Sipadan Island off the island of Borneo. It was a tiny volcanic island which you could walk around in 30 minutes and it had a 3000 metre drop off. Just 3 fin kicks from shore and you were in 1000 metres of water. There were huge schools of barracuda, huge schools of jacks, massive schools of bumphead parrot fish, and all of this was right off the beach.

MS – There was a green turtle rookery which is still going on today. There were literally hundreds



Cenotes, Mexico by Burt Jones

Nikonos 3, 15mm lens, no strobes on the camera, painted with slave strobe

and hundreds of green turtles and they would come up at night in the right season and lay their eggs around the beaches. That was really cool.

Where next?

MS – That's when we went to Indonesia. We were going out to Sipadan one day and there was a guy on the boat called Dr Kal Muller and he was



Soft Coral on Mangrove Roots, Raja Ampat by Maurine Shimlock. Nikon D 200 in Subal housing, Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes, Tokina 10-17 lens f/5.6, 1/125, ISO 200

researching the first book about diving in Indonesia called Underwater Indonesia. He asked us if we would be willing to go out there with him and check out this place called Komodo. He was part of a little company that took people to see the dragons



Schooling Ox-Eyed Scads, Raja Ampat by Maurine Shimlock
Nikon D 200 in Subal housing, Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes, Tokina 10-17 lens
f/3.5, 1/60th, ISO 160

and he was interested to find out if there was any really good diving. And indeed there was! After that, we were hooked and it was just Indonesia, Indonesia, Indonesia.

BJ – Then it just sort of mushroomed. We went from Komodo to the Banda Sea then up to Lembeh and then out to Raja Ampat.

So what took you to Raja Ampat?

MS – We began diving in Raja Ampat in 2002. The previous year Conservation International and The

Nature Conservancy, WWF and others had conducted a marine life survey and were totally blown away by what they had seen on Raja Ampat's reefs. There was one liveaboard operating out there at the time and we convinced the owner to join us on an exploratory on another boat. After we saw the reefs and the incredible fish biomass, we knew Raja Ampat was the holy grail of tropical reefs for diving tourists.

We returned to Raja Ampat for several weeks each year, wrote



Manta Ray, Raja Ampat by Burt Jones
Nikon D 7000 in Subal housing, Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes, Tokina 10-17 lens
f/9, 1/125th, ISO 400

articles, etc. and saw the tourism numbers rise to about 3000 divers per year until about 2007. In 2005 we had also explored a bit further south and saw Triton Bay for the first time. Again we were amazed at what we saw in term of fish life and especially soft corals.

On that trip to Triton Bay we crossed paths with Dr. Mark Erdmann of Conservation International. He had recently been promoted to Director of Marine Affairs for Conservation International. He knew our work

and approached us about writing a guide book for Raja Ampat as part of his plan to introduce tourism as an effective conservation strategy. Burt and I discussed this and decided that we would move to Bali in 2008 to begin researching a diver's guide to Raja Ampat.

It was a dream job for any underwater photographer. We were given a boat, money, time, etc. to explore, dive, photograph and write about what we found. Our mission was to record no less than 100

sites. Even by 2008, Raja Ampat was full of boats and they only dived the known sites; no one had time or money to explore. It was crucial to the reefs that the diver impact be spread out and not concentrated on just a few spots. It was also crucial for tourists to get to outlying reefs in order for commercial fishing operations to realize that eyes were watching and that no destructive fishing would be allowed on Raja Ampat's reefs.

We published Diving Indonesia's Raja Ampat in 2008; the year of the global economic crisis. Despite the fact that it was expensive and very time consuming to travel to Raja Ampat, tourism grew by nearly 40% and there were now at least 6000 divers that year visiting Raja Ampat. Tourism has grown exponentially since then; due in large part to our books and Raja Ampat's world class reefs.

By 2010 we had proven that "if we find it, they will come." Conservation International and Mark Erdmann wanted to include the rest of the geographical entity, Papua's Bird's Head Seascape, in the tourism development, so we decided on another guidebook. We wanted Raja Ampat to be seen and thought of as a part of the larger Bird's Head Seascape, not just a stand alone destination. So, we did it all again, we went to Cenderawasih and Triton Bay and explored and photographed, etc. and published a new guide in 2011, Diving Indonesia's Birds Head Seascape, which encompasses the entire area and includes most of the sites from the original Raja Ampat guide.

Books were quickly becoming a bit out dated as modes of imparting information to divers, so we decided that a web site would be the way to go to keep the Bird's Head Seascape at the forefront



Diver in Boo Window, Raja Ampat by Maurine Shimlock. Nikon D 200 in Subal housing, Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes, Tokina 10-17 lens f/5.6, 1/60th, ISO 250

of travelling divers' minds. We launched www.birdsheadseascape.com in the summer of 2014. The site includes all the info from the books, all the info on how to get there, and every dive site is mapped.



Split shot, Raja Ampat by Burt Jones. Nikon D 200 in Subal housing, Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes, Tokina 10-17 lens f/16, 1/125th, ISO 320

Tell us about Triton Bay.

BJ – Triton Bay is the third jewel in the crown of the Bird's Head Seascape. The visibility isn't as clear but the soft coral growth there is unprecedented in the world; there's no place like it on the planet. It's an amazing place. It's become

Whale Shark under Bagan by Burt Jones Nikon D 200 in Subal housing, Sea & Sea YS 250 strobes, Tokina 10-17 lens f/9, 1/80th, ISO 320

very popular for photographers and there is now a nice little resort that has opened up in the last year. The liveaboards are going there and there are also whale sharks. In Raja Ampat, Cenderawasih Bay, and Triton Bay, the whole thing is the last best place on the planet. It's the bullseye of marine biodiversity. We've been working in the best place for over a decade; we're really lucky.

Where do you think you will go exploring next?

BJ – It's funny because the circle is coming back on itself. I think the Solomon Islands have the best potential of any country to develop new and exciting dive itineraries. The itinerary that they have been running for over 20 years only touches a small part. There's huge islands with reef everywhere that's never been dived. Infrastructure is a problem in the Solomons. Getting people from the main town of Honiara out to these remote islands is very difficult.

Which other underwater photographers do you admire?

BJ – You've got maybe the best underwater photographer that has ever existed in the UK and his name is Alex Mustard. He is phenomenal.

He's cutting edge. He's the best. He's just a sweetheart of a guy. He doesn't seem to have any ego involvement in what he does. He's willing to share all of his techniques. There's another guy who is still around who doesn't work in photography any more named Chris Newbert who was a big influence on us. He brought art to the world of underwater photography. And Howard Hall; a very good friend of ours who still shoots but he does video and his early work was a big inspiration to us.

The image of the whale shark and the fishermen is quite iconic; I have seen it a lot on the internet. Can you tell us about this shot?

BJ – The point with the photograph was to show what was happening with the whale shark experience. It was not just the fact that you have whale sharks out there feeding but the whale sharks are attracted to those boats. The whale sharks are considered good luck by the fishermen so they try to keep those whale sharks around the boat. The idea in creating that photograph was to show not only the whale shark but to show them in context with what's going on around them.

MS – And also to show the fact



that you didn't have to be in the water; you could also be on the boat and photographing the whale sharks from above. We were trying to get tourists out there.

Thank you for such a fascinating insight.

Duncan Whittaker

For more information about Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock, visit www.secretseavisions.com

www.birdsheadseascape.com



Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter No
White Balance



Digital - No Filter Manual
White Balance



Magic Filter Manual
White Balance

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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