

The MSY Seahorse and the Whalesharks of Kwatisore Bay

by Tony Myshlyaev

At the mouth of Cenderawasih bay, northeast of Indonesia's Papua island, lies the city and island of Biak. Here it must be noted that the title of "city" for Biak is used very generously as the size rivals small western towns that arriving guests are often accustomed to. This may be far from the whalesharks everyone comes to see but to spend an entire ten day liveaboard trip seeing the whalesharks is redundant regardless of how obsessed one can think they are. So trips that begin in Biak will often work their way their way to the inner bay of Cenderawasih bay where Kwatisore lies just northwest of Nabire.

Guests will be diving notable destinations like the Catalina bomber plane in Biak, Pulau Putus, Miosnum, Spag Point of the Tridacna Atoll, Pulau Matas, Pulau Nuburi and many others. Otherwise, trips that start in Nabire may begin with the whalesharks and end in Biak or move onwards via the Dampier Strait towards central Raja Ampat. En route passing some of the said areas above as well as other options that span the

western rim of the bay. This includes muck diving the beaches of Oransbari, wreck diving the giant tanker near Manokwari and piles of Japanese landing crafts off the shores of Pulau Amsterdam.

The wide angle lens will be highly recommended for most of the trip. Overall, the bay's reputation lies in its lush reefs, abundant with a great diversity of enormous and unfettered coral. According to a survey from 2011 published in Diving Indonesia's Bird's Head Seascape by Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock with Dr. Mark Erdmann and Dr. Gerald Allen, there is a total of 469 varieties of hard coral in Cenderawasih bay.

As much as the Bird's Head Peninsula is known for its biodiversity, Cenderawasih Bay is a unique exception to the overall reputation. 14 million years of tectonic plate movements had sundered Cenderawasih from the rest of the Bird's Head Peninsula. The

*The feeding area. Subal w/ Nikon D700
16mm f/2.8D. ISO 400 - f/8 - 1/250th*



access of currents was heavily restricted and thus larvae and nutrients were unable to flow in. There were constant fluctuations in sea levels due to the movement of the plates that lie beneath the mouth of the great bay. These fluctuations in sea levels have been ongoing for the past 2 million years.

This exposed large expanses of reefs causing a mass deterioration in stabilized habitats but some marine life was able to adapt. Species that would only be found at greater depths are now accessible at recreational diving depths. While common reef fish that were able to assimilate began to possess colour variations or evolved into endemic species. To this day, the current flow into the bay is still restricted and the common reef fish have lived uncontested due to restricted larvae flow into the depths of the bay. Some of the endemic species are listed below:

Cirrhilabrus cenderwasih (Fairy wrasse)

Paracheilinus walton (Walton's flasher wrasse)

Hemiscyllium galei (Cenderwasih Bay walking shark)

Chromis unipa (Damsel fish)

Lepadichthys sp. (Cenderawasih clingfish)

Meiacanthus sp. (Cenderawasih fangblenny)

Calumia papuensis (Papuan gudgeon)

Calumia eilperini (Eilperin's gudgeon)

Chrysiptera pricei (Prices' demoiselle)

Pterocaesio monikae - (Monika's fusilier)

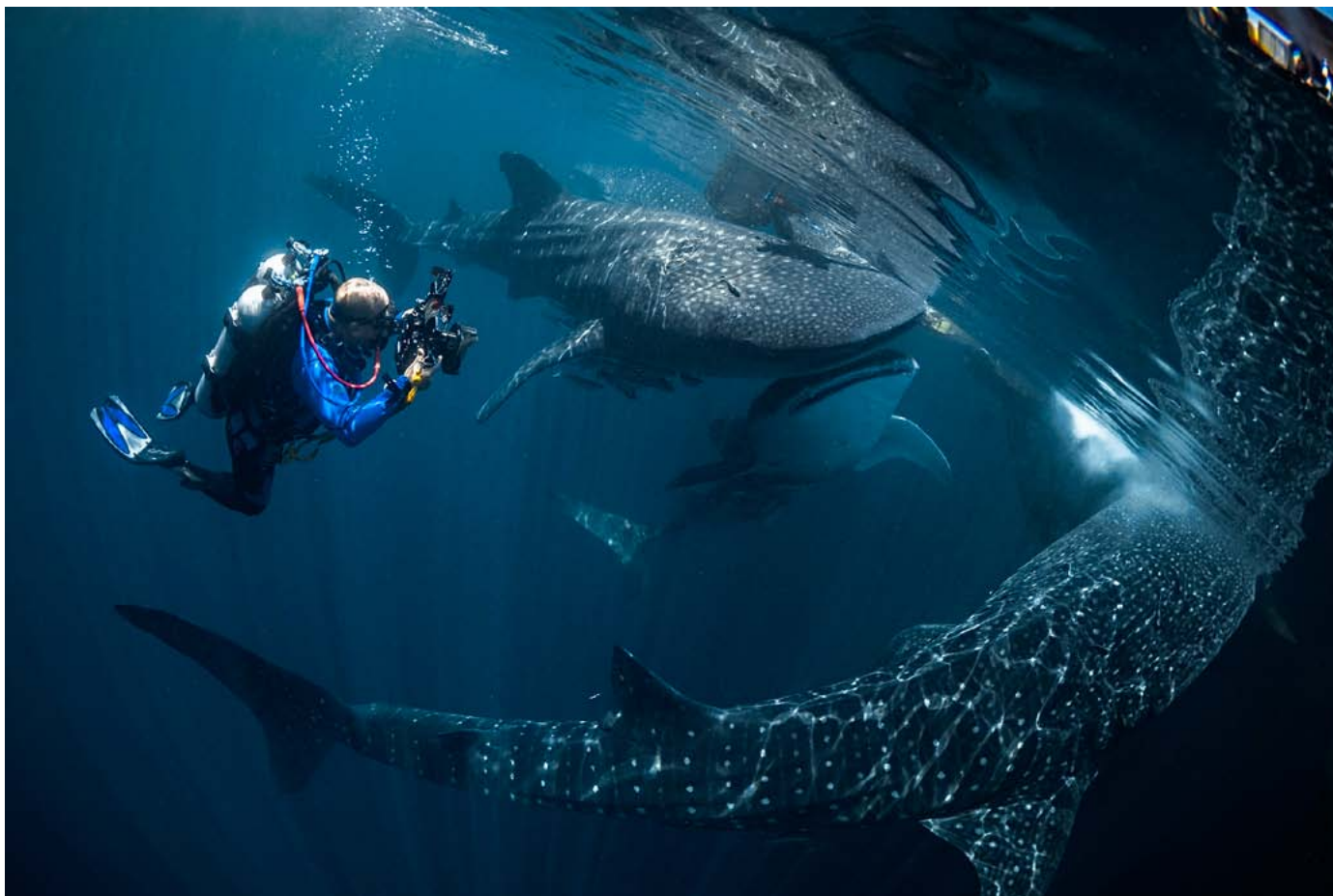
Pseudochromis sp. (Wandammen dottyback)

Pictichromis caitlinae (Caitlin's dotty back)

Lubbockichthys sp. (Cenderawasih dottyback)

Forcipiger sp. (Cenderawasih long-nosed butterflyfish)

In order to enter Cenderawasih bay, all guests must be cleared by respective authorities. This involves official documentation, passports and the



Jeffrey Neu with his hands full and work cut out for him. Subal w/ Nikon D700 16mm f/2.8D. ISO 400 - f/8 - 1/250th

like. All of which is handled by the liveaboard on the guests' behalf. However as the voyage begins, very quickly the little civilization that is left behind is taken over by jungle and local villages which give little heed to official documentation. Here the permits do not suffice and the matter is handled by council with the local elders. It is important for them to understand that a large boat arriving from beyond the horizon is not there to take their resources but rather come to observe the marine life

and move on. A concept that is entirely alien to a self sustained village.

Before, this was a very difficult process as the locals had no understanding of what scuba diving was all about and explaining the concept to people who prefer a primitive way of life was not easy. Though nowadays the sight of liveaboards have become slightly more familiar to them. Nonetheless it must still be handled in the traditional manner of sitting down for a drink and making the vessel's



Using the flash against the westering sun. Subal w/ Nikon D700 16mm f/2.8D & 2 INON Z240's. ISO 200 - f/9 - 1/200th

intentions very clear. Only then can divers proceed to explore the nearby reefs. Often, money is not the answer as one may think. With good graces from the villagers, the diving will proceed unhindered.

For most guests, the climactic portion of the voyage is the whalesharks of Kwatisore Bay. Kwatisore is a name derived from two words of a local dialect meaning "afternoon mist" because of the timely fog that rolls in on the nearby mountains. That is where

the whalesharks are summoned by fishermen on fishing platforms named bagans. To some, it may be viewed as a controversial practice. This should be left up to the reader to decide however to the whaleshark's benefit, their survival is entwined with the livelihood of thousands in the region and thus they are protected and none dare to capture them for sale on any blackmarket unlike many other places. As well, transmitters may be visible on their dorsal fin as they are often the subject of research and their



Approaching Matas Island at sunset. Nikon D700 24-70m - f/2.8G. ISO 200 - f/5.6 - 1/200th

movements are carefully monitored.

In order to attract the whalesharks they must catch food for them. So the bagans begin fishing at night with the use of high powered lights and nets that span the area of the platform. The nets are lowered below the lights. At first this attracts the small plankton at the bottom of the food chain but slowly larger fish begin to arrive. Not unlike blackwater diving or squid fishing. Thus the fish are ensnared in the nets and by



Portrait of a Papuan in Nabire. Nikon D700 24-70mm f/2.8G. ISO 640 - f/3.2 - 1/250th

morning they are raised. At dawn the fish are chopped up into chum. Although this is not their natural food source, the whalesharks adore it insatiably. They follow the trail of the chum water to the nearest bagan. And if they arrive in the morning, it will often ensure their stay for many hours onwards. The amount of bagans in the bay can vary but roughly 10-15 are always present during the high season of June through September. Based on the weather, the bagans will move



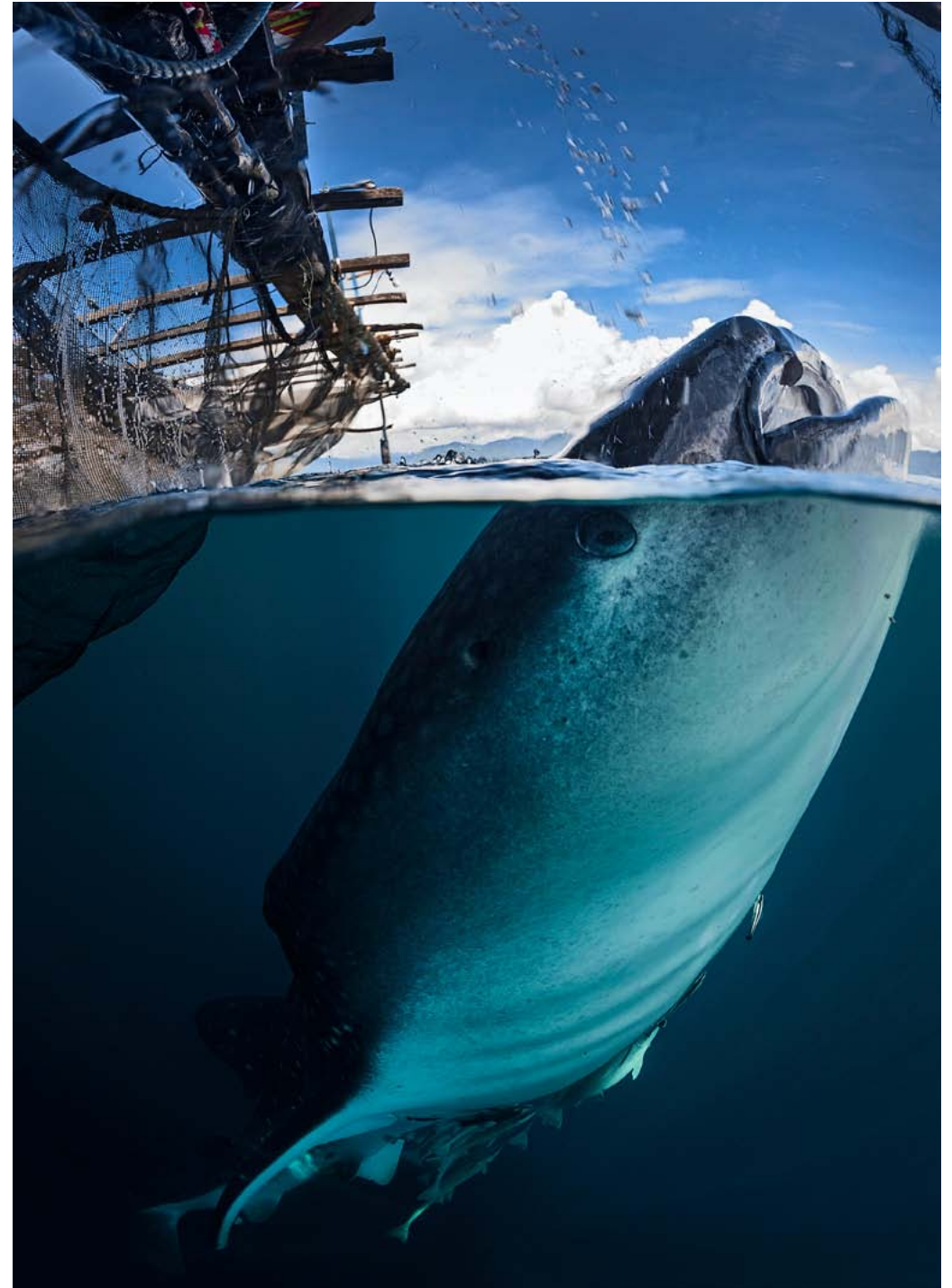
Boy on the bagan watching something interesting on TV to stay awake. Nikon D700 24-70mm f/2.8G. ISO 3200 - f/2.8 - 1/50th

Calm seas called for utilizing split level images. Subal w/ Nikon D700 16mm f/2.8D. ISO 400 - f/9 - 1/250th

to various areas to seek shelter from wind or stormy seas.

The liveboards will make their rounds to the nearest of the bagans and will decide which one they will dive based on the amount of whalesharks present. This of course is subject to change at any moment as no one can wholly control the will of the world's biggest fish though the pattern is that if a few arrive early on, often more are soon to follow. All the bagans have various owners which manage them out of Nabire which

makes the practice competitive as there are daily rates to host divers at their platform. One evening the guests and I of the MSY Seahorse visited our platform to observe the fishing practices and lives of the workers. Approximately 6-8 workers manage the operation and share one small enclosed room located at the centre of the platform. According to them, the cost of construction of a single high end platform is about 400,000,000 IDR which translates roughly to 33,000 USD. Although they vary in





Coral and Clownfish. Subal w/ Nikon D700 16mm f/2.8D & 2 INON Z240's. ISO 200 - f/13 - 1/320th

easier to manage. The platforms provide a unique appearance above when utilizing snell's window and for that, waiting for the whalesharks to begin their dive after feeding is often the best timing. However it is recommended that high noon is reserved for downwards compositions which can simply be accomplished with a snorkel and natural light. It is better to utilize the sun where otherwise the photographer would have to fight against it with strobes, often resulting in overexposed backgrounds. Weather permitting, the calm seas can allow for split level photography which is made all the easier because of the extended pose the whalesharks hold while feeding. Otherwise the standard downward angles are made more aesthetic by utilizing a portion of the surface in the image. Remember to use a quick shutter speed to fully freeze the water movement above.

Fisheyes and super wide angle lenses are a must to capture much of what Cenderawasih discloses. The macro lens should only be packed for this trip if baggage allowance permits. Not only is it going to sit in the bag for the whalesharks but also during much of the trip. Domestic flights to the region tend to have a check-in baggage allowance much less than photographers are used to although Garuda is quite lenient on carry on limitations (wink-wink).

Aboard the MSY Seahorse, there is no schedule for diving the platforms and at any given point one can go and dive as much as they want between the hours of 0700 to 1700. On our final day at Kwatisore Bay, we were graced with the presence of 9 whalesharks that constantly made rounds to

the bagans. This was a ratio greater than that of the divers present.

Once the trip begins, say farewell to a cellular signal until Biak, Nabire or Manokwari. Instead embrace the spectacular views of sunrises and sunsets over untouched mountains and rainforests. Breathe the crisp air and hear the melodies of exotic bird calls that echo over the passing waters.

Tony Myshlyaev



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quality so this price could be much less elsewhere.

Photographers flock to shoot the whalesharks and are often rewarded with unique images as the opportunity to photograph them goes on for the whole day. The giants often stay shallow while they are fed by the fishermen yet after a few minutes in a vertical feeding position, they will duck down and descend to 15-30 meters making a circle around the bagan before reappearing several minutes later for another serving. Scuba gear is useful for flash photography which will make upward compositions