

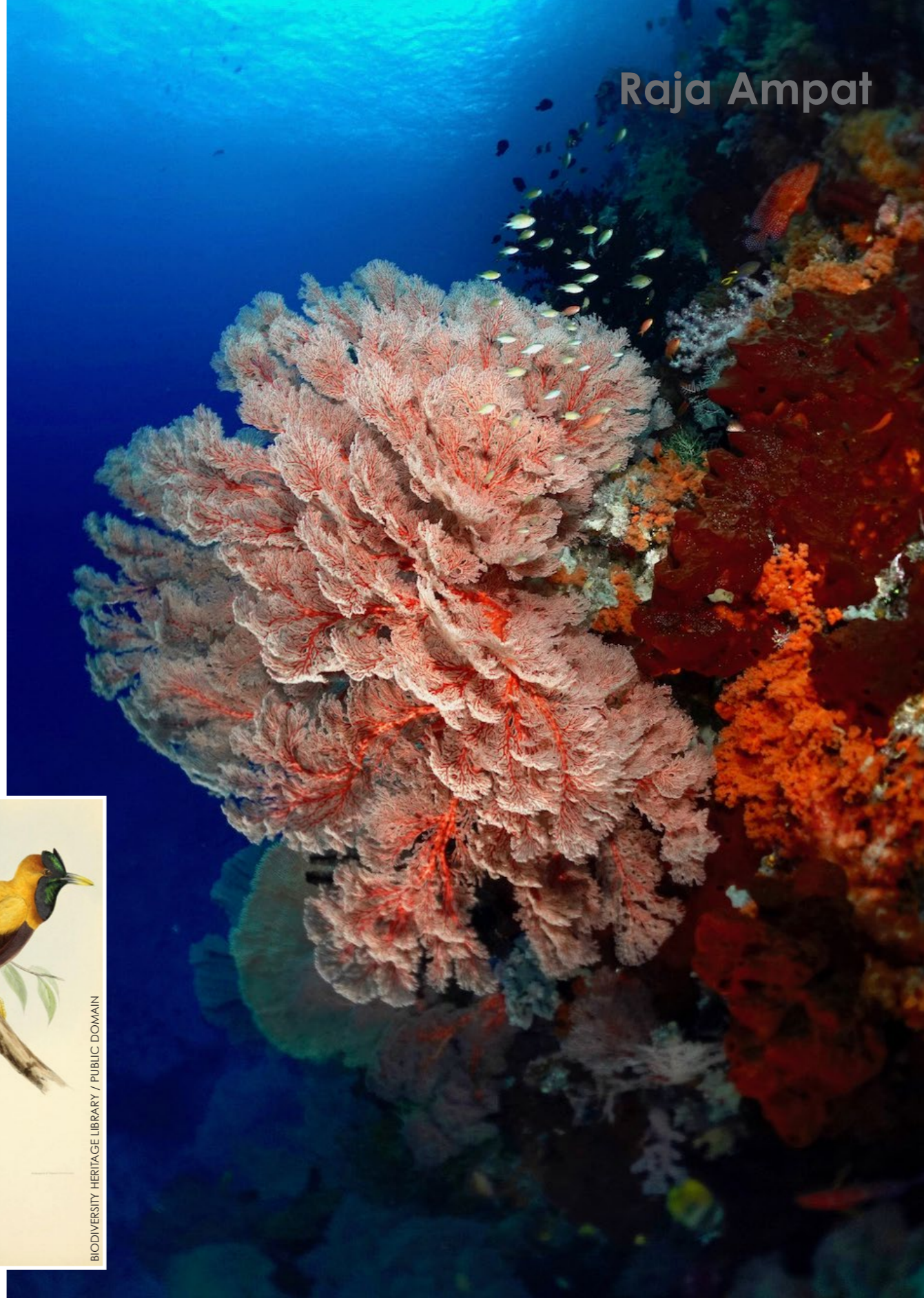


Indonesia's

Raja Ampat

— A Papuan Odyssey

Text and photos by
Pierre Constant



The Raja Ampat Islands, located in Indonesia's West Papua province, nestled between the Pacific Ocean, the Halmahera Sea and Seram Island, are at the crossroads of tremendous biodiversity and coral diversity—home to 75 percent of the world's reef species. Pierre Constant returned to the region and shares his tales of diving and cultural experiences there.

The night was very dark, as I disembarked with fellow travellers, from the tender boat onto the silent shores of Waigeo Island. Hot and humid was the air, and I had hardly slept due to jet lag. It was five o'clock in the morning in the

village of Saporkren. Local guide Benny took us straight onto a jungle trail for a 45-minute climb to the top of a forested ridge. As I looked around, my headlamp shone on some millipedes, a hermit crab and a dwarf frog hopping around on the forest floor. Soon, we were invited to sit on a bench of branches at the top of the hill and wait.

Daybreak came slowly, as we tuned in to the sounds of the jungle. A big, tall tree appeared in a clearing in front of us, with a crown of hairy branches. Bird songs filled the air. Suddenly, a dark shadow materialised high above, flying frantically back and forth across the sky. Eventually, it landed on a branch and resumed an amazing display of reddish-brown feathers. Two long, white, helically twisted tail feathers shook in the air erratically. "The red bird-of-paradise," whispered Benny behind me.

Although it resembles the greater bird-of-paradise of Papua New Guinea, this magnificent bird (*Paradisaea rubra*) is endemic to Waigeo and can be found only on this island. The male performs a ritualistic courtship display every morning before sunrise, in

order to attract a female. She was obviously not in the mood that day, as we sat bewildered with our faces towards the sky.



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Gorgonian coral on the wall at Neptune's Fan Sea, Raja Ampat, West Papua, Indonesia (above); Historical illustration of red bird-of-paradise, *Paradisaea rubra* (center inset); Feeding whale shark, with remoras attached to its belly, at Namatote (top left). PREVIOUS PAGE: Cluster of orange cup corals found on an early morning dive at Saruenus Island in the Iris Strait of Raja Ampat



Isolated beach in Namatote Bay (above); The Mommon waterfall splashes straight out of the jungle into the Arafura Sea (left).

tribes of New Guinea.

At the northwestern end of the Bird Head's Peninsula (also known as, Vogelkop) of New Guinea—the second largest island in the world—the Raja Ampat Islands (or Four Kings) are nothing new on the diving scene. My first trip there was 17 years ago in 2004, when only two dive boats were operating in these waters. Now, there are a hundred dive boats and a number of land-based resorts, which have sprouted like mushrooms.

The archipelago is widespread enough so you do not feel the pressure of tourism, such as it is in Komodo National Park, for example. Besides the four main islands of Waigeo, Batanta, Salawati and Misool, the Raja Ampat Islands are composed of 1,500 islands over a surface of 46,300 sq km, with the highest summit, Gunung Batanta, rising to 1,184m.

Raja Ampat Marine Park

Located between the Pacific Ocean, the Halmahera Sea and the Seram Sea (0°13'59"S and 130°31'01"E), the Raja Ampat Islands are at the crossroads of tremendous biodiversity and coral diversity, with 75 percent of the world's species, according to The Nature Conservancy. Since 2003, it is an administrative division or "kabupaten" of West Papua, with Sorong as its capital and main gateway for air travel. As of December 2019, the Raja Ampat Marine Park permit fee for international visitors is IDR 700,000 (~US\$49), on top of which the Raja Ampat visitor entry ticket comes as an additional charge. Expect to pay a total of IDR 1,000,000 (~US\$70).

Within this huge marine expanse, three main areas are distinguished: northern Raja Ampat around Waigeo Island, where most of the resorts are located; central Raja Ampat around Batanta Island; and southern Raja Ampat, around Misool Island. Close to the Equator and protected by mountainous island masses,



(i.e. without feet), therefore, "birds of paradise." Alfred Russel Wallace, British naturalist and explorer, spent six years in what was once called the "Malay Archipelago" shooting, collecting and describing specimens of birds-of-paradise of various species. Today, the birds enjoy legal protection. Hunting is only allowed for the ceremonial needs of the

View over Raja Ampat from Piaynemo viewpoint (above); Wilson's bird-of-paradise in a courtship display at Waigeo Island (left)

Back on the road, a pickup truck took us farther

uphill, to the middle of nowhere. A trail led to a hideaway in the jungle. Hidden from view, we witnessed the show in a clearing of another breathtaking creature: the Wilson's bird-of-paradise (*Cicinnurus respublica*). Displaying a terrestrial court, moving from a chosen branch to the ground, it was just fascinating. With a shiny, turquoise-blue head and nape, flashy crimson back feathers glowing like embers, and an emerald-green chest with a yellow collar, the bird was enchanting to watch. Suddenly aware of our presence, it took refuge in the shade of a higher branch, until

we vanished out of sight. Wilson's bird-of-paradise is endemic to the Waigeo and Batanta islands.

There are 42 species and 15 genera of birds-of-paradise. Confined to dense forest habitat, at various elevations between sea level and the highlands, the majority of the species are sexually dimorphic, with a diet dominated by fruits and arthropods. Voyagers in Ferdinand de Magellan's circumnavigation of the world in 1519 to 1522 first encountered their skins. Local people claimed they originated in paradise, naming them "Bolon diuta" or "Birds of God." Early naturalists named them "apoda"





Sergeant majors under Airborek jetty (above); The *Damai I* anchored at Yenbuba village (top left); Diagonal sweetlips and ribbon sweetlips at Cape Kri (left); Orange tube sponge at Airborek Island (far left)



the archipelago has a humid tropical climate, where rain showers are common. The tourist season for divers is mostly from October to April with good visibility and sea temperatures around 29°C to 30°C on average. July to September is the monsoon season when winds affect the seas.

This was my fourth time to Raja Ampat. I chose to take the tour aboard the 40m-long, 8m-wide wooden Bugis Phinisi called the *MY Damai I*, for its legendary comfort and service—which was even more exceptional now, because it offered an appealing combina-

tion of diving experiences from northern Raja Ampat to southern Raja Ampat, all the way to Triton Bay on the southern coast of Papua. Furthermore, it included land excursions such as a birds-of-paradise tour on Waigeo and an exciting remote excursion to Asmat (which was, once upon a time, an infamous land of cannibals, who were nevertheless extraordinary

woodcarvers)—a conspicuous plus that was not on offer elsewhere.

Diving

Blue Magic. The morning dive at Blue Magic, a seamount in the middle of Dampier Strait—between Waigeo and Batanta Island—was an opportunity to meet Napoleon wrasse, a school of sleek unicornfish, a grey reef shark followed by tunas

and jacks, and the usual farandole of bigeye jacks. Adri, the dive guide pointed to a fair-sized wobbegong shark, camouflaged on the top of a mound, dozing off.

Cape Kri. Cape Kri, off an elongated island farther west, was dark and misty underwater. There were lots of gorgonians and sea fans. A surprise lurked at a depth of 36m, where a large ball of ribbon sweetlips, diagonal sweetlips and paddletail snappers, was swirling around, as if in a meditative state. At the safety stop, a blacktip reef shark cruised by, and orbicular batfish hovered in the water column.



Zi and the giant clam at Airborek



Diver with school of jacks and barracudas (above) and diver with school of pinjalo snappers (top right) at Mayhem, Yangefo Island; Yellow scroll coral on top of reef at Melissa's Garden (right); Lightshow under Airborek jetty (left)

bommies spread out here and there, full of glassfish and green *Tubastraea* coral.

A school of bumphead parrotfish drifted like Zepellins over the sandy bottom, shy as ever; I would not stand a chance, trying to photograph them. The jetty was great for wide-angle shots, with a cloud of sergeant majors underneath the structure, accompanied by the odd red snapper with a stern look. Towards the end of the dive, the cruise director, Zi, with a hammerhead shark gadget trailing from the valve of her tank, led me to a marvellous collection of five or six giant clams, over a metre long, in the shallows. "Just don't put your hand in there!" she joked beforehand.

Mayhem. Mayhem, near Yangefo Island, is another seamount. Schools of yellowfin surgeonfish (*Acanthurus xanthopterus*) whitetongue jacks (*Uraspis helvola*), bigeye jacks and Java rabbitfish (*Siganus java*) dotted the sides of the seamount. Large pickhandle barracudas (*Sphyraena jello*) with yellow tails were an unusual sight. Down the slope, a big mass of red and mouse-grey Pinjalo snappers (*Pinjalo pinjalo*), moving in a lively dance, made my day. Mindlessly, an oceanic manta passed by like a ghost, whispering: "No, you



don't see me." Batavia batfish (*Platax batavianus*) and teira batfish entertained in the shallows.

Melissa's Garden. Following a dive at Melissa's Garden, around three limestone rock islets off Penemu Island, which was mostly a hard-

coral garden with table coral, staghorn and leaf corals, the tender boat took us on an excursion to the "geosite" of Piaynemo. A wooden stairway in the limestone jungle climbed to a viewpoint overlooking a splendid bay of rock islands in a conical shape.

A late afternoon stroll at the village of Yenbuba was enjoyable. Kids frolicked on the jetty, playing games with their teachers. Just too tired at the end of the day, I skipped the night dive, with a smile and a "no thanks," and slipped into the double bed in my large cabin, with a sigh of contentment.

Airborek Island jetties. As the sun rose on the placid waters of the Halmahera Sea, I was up on deck at 5 a.m., to take in deep breaths of the clean air. The *Damai I* was anchored in front of Airborek Island. The double jetty in the distance would be our dive site. The visibility underwater was fine on the healthy coral garden, with



Being first to the top, I breathed in the natural beauty and pristine silence of the fabulous scenery, before a noisy cocktail of nationalities showed up. What a tourist spot the Raja Ampat Islands have become over the years! At the bottom of a flight of steps on the other side, a green warning sign read: "For the infirm: Please do not climb to the top." Too bad I went the wrong way!

Southern Raja Ampat
The next day, before sunrise, I stood on the forward bow to embrace the 360-degree panorama. A chain of rock islands, lost in time, slowly emerged on the horizon. Backed by a thin layer

School of longfin batfish (above), *Nembrotha cristata* nudibranch (left), yellow-lined flatworm (far left), Anna's chromodoris nudibranch (top center), and banded sea krait (right) at Two Tree (top right); Dive boat off to Puri Pinnacle (far right); Sea cucumber on Yilliet night dive (bottom right)

of cottony clouds, southern Raja Ampat's subtle splendour blossomed in the undisturbed peace of dawn. In this ancient barrier reef of coral limestone—now broken, uplifted and covered by tufts of jungle—the air is soft, like the caress of a feather. I recalled my first time in Misool, a long time ago. Nothing had changed; it was still a blessing of nature, far away from civilisation. The *Damai I* would remain in the south for three full days.

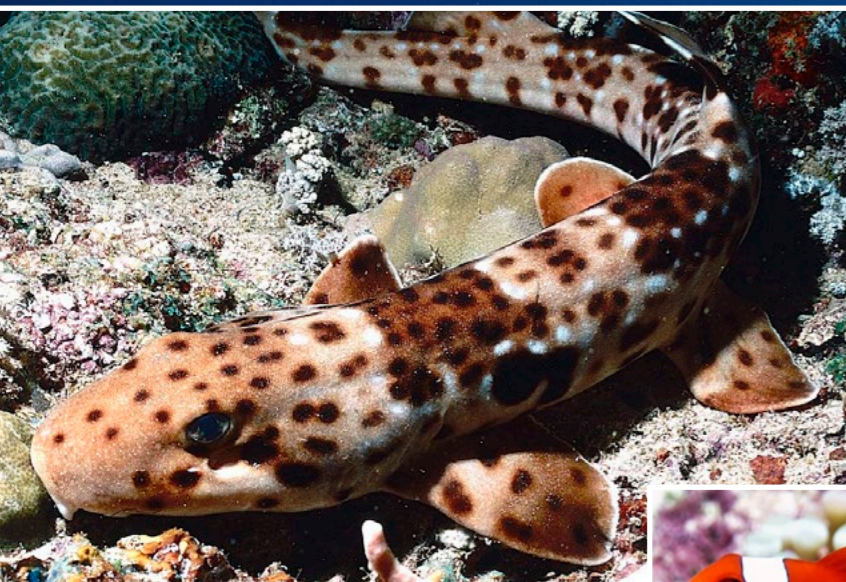
Two Tree Island. Two Tree Island, off Sagof Island, resembles a nudibranch with two trees on it. A fishing eagle arose above its nest to have a peek at the boat. The dive site was a wall covered in sea fans and gorgonians. "Prepare for macro," advised dive guide Adri. My nudibranch encounters included Anna's chromodoris (*Chromodoris annae*); the nudibranch *Nembrotha cristata*, which is black with green dots; and a lovely flatworm, *Pseudoceros sp.3*,

fringed in apple green and blue. Indifferent to my presence, a banded sea snake lurked in every hole along my way.

No Contest. No Contest, off Balbulol Island, was a dive around three pinnacles, with sea fans, gorgonians, overhangs, whip coral, striking red whip coral and *Dendronephthya sp.* soft corals galore. Map pufferfish and elusive scrawled filefish were present too, with a school of Pinjalo snappers.

Puri Pinnacle. Puri Pinnacle sea-mount, located northwest of Yilliet

Island, which mimics the spine of a sleeping dinosaur in shape, had three pinnacles on the protected side. In this quiet spot where big-eye jacks, pickhandle barracudas



ing over the island. Rain came down on us, as we got ready on the foredeck. It even got cold, but the thought of entering water of 29.7°C was comforting. Neptune's Sea Fan, Boo's

Windows and Nudi Rock dive sites, near Fiabacet Island were on the plan for the day. The last dive site was recommended for macro photography. Dive guides Adri and Daniel took pride in showing us a rare

pygmy seahorse (*Hippocampus pontohi*), which was white with a red mane, exciting divers searching for the microscopic.

Magic Mountain. However, some prefer the bigger picture (or wide-angle) and the thrill of giants at Magic Mountain, a famous seamount, which was still unknown in 2004, except to a young British skipper who had



christened it. This dive site is no less than a cleaning station for mantas. Back then, we had skin-dived over the top of the seamount, where seven oceanic manta rays were cir-

and Napoleon wrasse hovered timelessly between the pinnacles, gold-spotted trevally (*Carangoides bajad*) in their yellow phase hunted in small packs. A garden of *Sarcophyton* soft corals covered the reef flat.

The night dive was an occasion to meet the Raja Ampat bamboo shark (also known as "walking shark"). Do not look for it on the slope. This nocturnal species is only found in the shallows, at a maximum depth of 5m. A cute species, it is extremely shy though and afraid of lights!

Wahil Island

As we sailed towards Wahil Island, the weather turned ugly, with dark clouds loom-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Black manta at Magic Mountain; Batavia batfish and clown triggerfish at Neptune's Fan Sea; Octopus in disguise at Andiamo; Manta ray (above) and red whip coral and bigeye snappers (left) at Magic Mountain; Spinecheek anemonefish at Nudi Rock; Triton Bay walking shark



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Location of Puri Pinnacle dive site; *Goniobranchus coi* sea slug feeding on ascidians at Teluk Wap; Gorgonian sea fan and manta ray at Magic Mountain; Soft coral and featherstars at Lighthouse, Pisang Island; Barramundi at Candy Store; Zebra shark at Lighthouse



cling. But everything seemed quiet today. However, as I slid down the ridge towards the other

seamount at 19m, I came across four mantas, including a black one. Giant jacks frequented the site, as well as pretty schools of yellow bigeye snappers (*Lutjanus lutjanus*) on the saddle between the seamounts.

Daram

The *Damai I* departed Warakaraket Island for the easternmost islands of the Misool group: Daram. These islands became a new Marine Protected Area in 2010, after the efforts of the Misool Eco Resort paid off, in which they came to an agreement with the traditional owners of the villages of Fafanlap and Usaha Jaya. The idea was to turn these

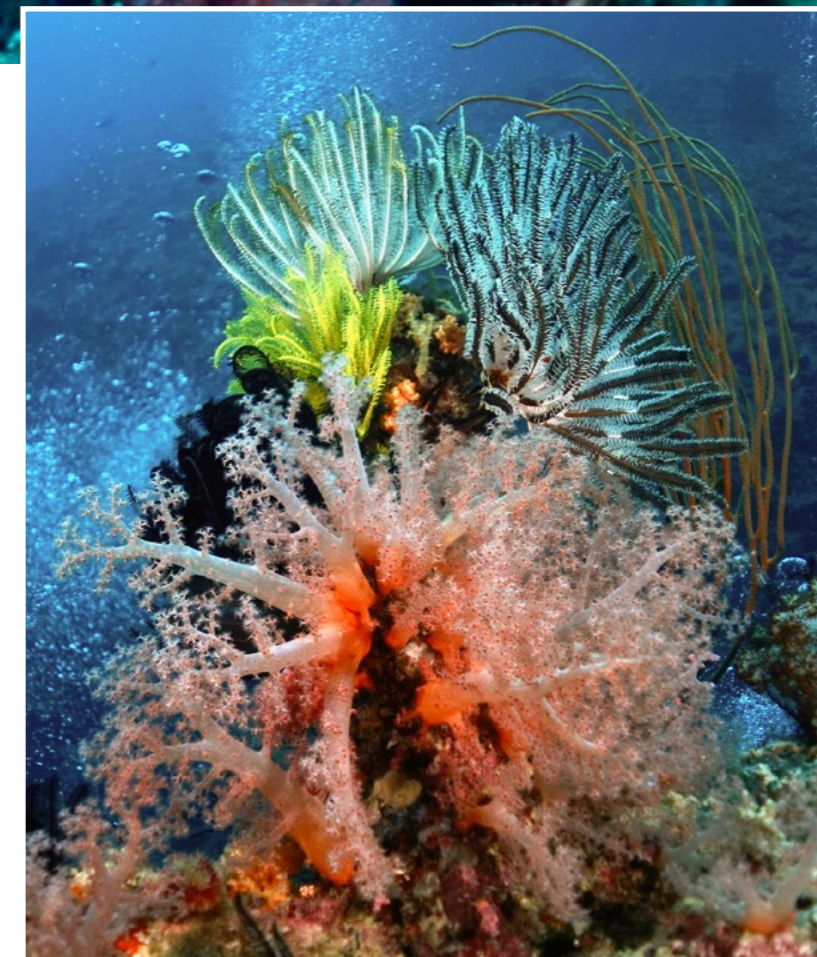
islands into a "no-take zone." The latter was added to the already existing Batbitim Marine Conservation Area (425 sq km) created with the approval of the village of Yelliu in 2005. The dive sites of Andiamo and Candy Store are an enchantment of sea fans, gorgonians, soft corals and barrel sponges, with the added bonus of a swim-through arch.

Off Fakfak Peninsula, halfway between Misool and the Papuan mainland, lay the Pisang Islands, which were uplifted limestone isles covered in jungle. At the Lighthouse dive site, I explored the reef, a sandy flat bedecked with whip coral with the odd red one in the mix. To my astonishment, an unusual silhouette lay in the sand in the distance. Holding my breath for a smooth approach, it was none other than a zebra shark (*Stegostoma fasciatum*) in its reverie—cream in colour, with black dots. The peaceful creature allowed me to zoom in, from a distance of 1.5m

away; it got alarmed by the first flash of my strobes but settled down again. On the second flash of the lights, it fled peevishly to the top of the reef, with vigorous movements of its caudal tail.

The dive site T-Bone, a hammerhead-shaped reef nearby, offered a bonanza of elephant ear sponges in yellow and purple colours, at a depth of 20m plus. Some reckoned it was a good site for macro. Close to the mainland, Mommon seamount was a hangout for mantas. The reef was sadly criss-crossed by a spiderweb of old longlines, evidence of the massive destruction of its original fish life.

The dive sites Batu Cantik and Teluk Wap were sought-after sites for macro subjects. There, I marvelled at the nudibranch *Nembrotha sp.1*, which was black with red dots and silver-grey gills, as well as *Goniobranchus coi*, a ravishing nudibranch, which was yellow with a black girdle, edged with light brown.





Whale sharks gather to feed under a "bagan" fishing platform at Teluk Namatote

Whale sharks

Teluk Namatote is the chosen spot for many "bagans," or fishing platforms. Small fry is caught at night with big lights and nets hanging under the *bagan*. If it attracts the tiny, it also attracts the giants, such as whale sharks. It is a lucrative business for fishermen, who complement their earnings with the visits of foreigners. Divers move about the *bagan* underwater, while locals feed the whale sharks with the "fish soup." With gaping mouths, the whale sharks come eagerly to the surface to gulp this free meal, repeatedly coming back for more. I counted around four whale sharks, the biggest one literally wrapped in a cocoon of remoras, glued to the top of its head, belly and sides.



Whale shark covered in remoras, attaching themselves to catch a ride

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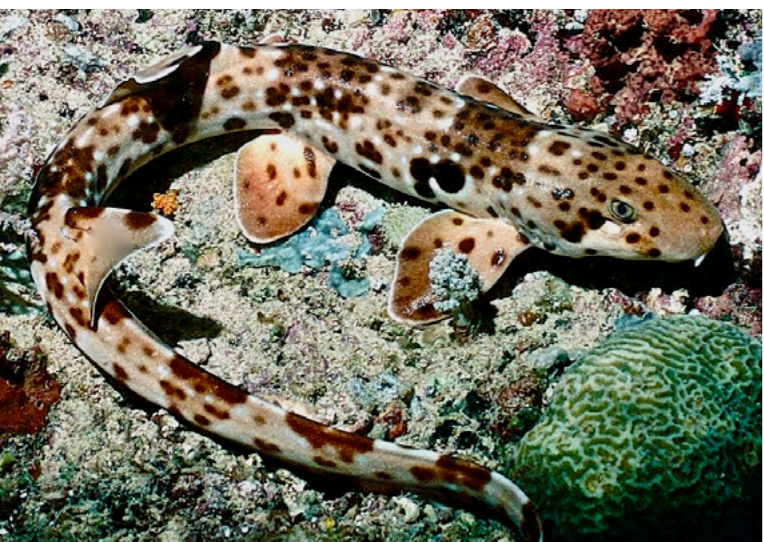
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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Triton Bay walking shark; Orange cup coral at Little Komodo; School of yellow and blueback fusiliers at Saruenus Island; Hawksbill sea turtle at Little Komodo; Rosy spindle cowrie, crinoid cuttlefish, and eight-banded butterflyfish at Triton Bay Divers house reef

Triton Bay

A couple of hours away was Triton Bay, our playground for the next three days. On the edge of the Arafura Sea, this marine wonderland was surveyed in 2006 by a joint team of researchers from Conservation International and the State University of Papua. Renowned Australian ichthyologist Dr Gerry Allen recorded 300 species of fish in a single dive and 20 species of

marine life that were new to science. Among them were the Nursalim flasherwrasse (*Paracheilinus nursalim*) and the Triton epaulette shark (*Hemiscyllium henryi*), which is even more elusive than the Raja Ampat walking shark. At the southeastern end of Triton Bay, Iris Strait—located between the mainland, Aiduma Island and Dramai Island—was where the action was. There was a collection of limestone rock islets crested with vegetation here, with sandy channels running alongside them. It was a favourite ground for spa-

ghetti garden eels. Conspicuous forests of black coral with white polyps graced the base of the slopes, somewhat like Little Komodo. These colonies acted as cleaning stations for various species of sweetlips, including ribboned, silver and goldspotted sweetlips; as well as six banded and bluring angelfish (*Pomacanthus annularis*); and groupers and barramundi. At depth, schools of bigeye snappers, bluestriped snappers (*Lutjanus kasmira*) and paddletail snappers add to the fairyland. The magic of colour was also expressed in the numerous patches



Location of West Papua in Indonesia on regional map



West Papua map (above) and Raja Ampat map (below)



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Sea star on night dive (above) and sleeping doublebar goatfish (top right) at White Rock; Marbled ray at Lighthouse (right); Anemone (bottom right)

Bluespotted grouper (above); Banded Tozeuma shrimp in black coral at Christmas Rock (right); Seafan at Neptune's Fan Sea (top left)

of orange cup coral on the walls of small drop-offs, bathed in the ever-present current of the Iris Strait. An early morning dive at Saruenus Island saw the full spectrum of colours displayed, from pink to orange and yellow, when the polyps were fully

opened. Schools of yellow-back and moon fusiliers added to the excitement; it was a veritable fountain of youth. To say that there was prolific soft coral growth everywhere would be an understatement. Large boulders offered good hiding spots for the tasselled wobbegong,

(*Eucrossorhinus dasypogon*). In addition, Bo's Rainbow and White Rocks were stimulating macro sites.

Asmat

It was a very long crossing from Triton Bay to Asmat, on the southern coast of New Guinea. "Forty hours, depending on the sea conditions," reckoned Mus, our Indonesian cap-



Raja Ampat

Smiling Asmat man with cassowary headdress (left); Asmat woman meeting the war canoes at the village of Omanasep (below); Asmat boy wearing war paint and cassowary headdress at the village



Asmat warriors in a dugout canoe (above); Paulus, the Asmat "big man," in traditional attire with pig teeth, at the village of Omanasep (left)

tain. After a bit of rough seas, which lasted into the night, swinging furniture around the cabin floor, the *Damai I* dropped anchor at the mouth of the Omi River. It was 2:30 a.m. Cappuccino-coloured water in the head, gathering black clouds, and light rain welcomed our arrival. There was low-lying jungle and muddy swamps as far as the eye could see. "No contact made with the guide yet," lamented Zi.

Incidentally, Asmat was the launching point for a French-Dutch expedition (1958-1959) from the southern coast to the northern coast of New Guinea, resulting in

a book and a documentary, *The Sky Above—The Mud Below*, which won an Academy Award in 1961.

Finally, after a little-over-three-hour desperate wait on board, we were given the signal to disembark. The sun came out shyly. We made our way up the Oman River with the tender boats, twisting between nipa palms and muddy banks under the cover of the swampy jungle. Forty-five minutes later, a motorised canoe with two serious-looking Asmat men, wearing cassowary feather headdresses, came to meet us. "You wait here," said one, with the palm of his hand extended forward.

Once the signal was given, we proceeded cautiously. A flotilla of dugout canoes suddenly emerged from hiding places in the green jungle on both sides of the river, carrying painted warriors in red and white colours, wearing cassowary black feathers or cuscus (possum) fur on their heads. Paddling upright, fast and furious, around our boat, making loud grunts and hitting canoes with the flat of their paddles, they performed an intimidating dance. Children, as well as defiant-looking teenagers, also

took part. "This is the traditional welcoming ceremony," whispered Nicky, our guide from Jayapura.

Standing tall on the bank of the river, wearing a crown of white cockatoo feathers on his head and a collar of wild pig teeth around his neck, Paulus the Bigman stared at us in a dignified manner. We were brought to the longhouse of Omanasep Village for another ceremony with the men of the tribe. An offer-





Asmat wooden hand drum (above); Cassowary bone knife (left); Asmat wooden shields (far left)

TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: Ceremony in the Asmat longhouse in Omanasep; Asmat with his artefacts for sale; Longhouse in Youw; Woodcarver at work in Youw (above left); Asmat carving (above right)

ing of tobacco and Gudang Garam cigarettes accompanied a “thank you” speech by one of our members. “This whole show has a cost,” confessed Nicky. “How much, may I ask?” I queried. “IDR45,000,000!” said Nicky (which is about US\$3,200). “You see, there are

over 800 people in the village. Everyone wants to make some money. Men request IDR100,000; women IDR50,000; and children IDR10,000.” With the required preliminaries over, the longhouse turned into a souvenir market. Sitting on the bark flooring, villagers unwrapped their wooden carvings, spears, poles, grass skirts, headdresses and even cassowary bone knives. Baffled, I gazed at some polished stone adzes (axes) from the deep mountainous interior. “Bargain with the highlanders,” I was told. The beautiful original pieces

would normally sell for IDR1,000,000 a piece (~US\$70). “You might be able to get it for US\$35—it’s alright!”

As the rain fell, we took refuge in the school. Lunch boxes from the *Damai I* were distributed to us. The longhouse of another village was full of Asmat shields. The art sale resumed, for the enjoyment of the foreign visitors.

Historical background

After the arrival of the Dutch in 1623, missionaries made serious efforts at conversion. James Cook landed in September 1770. His party was repelled by a threatening group of Asmat warriors. The first colonial post of the Dutch was established in Agats in 1938. Since then,

Roman Catholicism has replaced many of the indigenous ways. Deep down, however, you can still see the pride of fearsome warriors in the eyes of many of the youths.

The rock-bottom reality struck me hard. We are tolerated, even accepted, for the sake of business and the support of the community. “What did you expect?” I thought to myself. Nonetheless, the whole show had an expression of genuine authenticity. This, after all, was an uncompromising message. ■

With a background in biology and geology, French author, cave diver, naturalist guide and tour operator Pierre Constant is a widely published

photojournalist and underwater photographer. For more information, please visit: calaolifestyle.com.

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