

Conservation Initiatives in The Bunaken National Park and Adjacent Areas



By Sophie Parry

I decided to write this article as having made several trips to the region, I wanted to know what activities related to diving and conservation had been carried out or were ongoing in the area.

The biggest threats to the local reef systems come from the solid waste that finds its way out to sea from Manado City. Another threat is the use of cyanide by local fishermen. A survey carried out by the Indonesian Perpetual Ocean Foundation in 2004 reported that 70-80% of coral in the area is dead. Reasons cited for this shocking find are due to a massive tsunami that hit the area in 1992, the El Nino event of 1998 and cyanide fishing.

My interest in marine conservation in the area was kindled by the fact that every visiting diver from abroad pays 150,000 rupiah to dive in the Bunaken National Marine Park. This is not a large sum of money by western standards, but I did feel it pertinent to enquire about projects the money had or was funding.

The entrance fee receipt requests e-mail addresses from those visitors who would like to receive periodic updates of activities/ conservation programmes in Bunaken. I remember giving my e mail address on a previous trip 12 months ago, but to-date, have received no information.

Taman Nasional Bunaken does not seem to have a web site or any published information available in the local dive centres. I enquired at a local dive centre about any past/current projects being funded by the entrance fees. The response indicated that a fair proportion of the fee went on subsidising higher education for local students and possibly other land based projects. For instance, 30% of the entrance fee has been used to fund village level conservation and development projects. Past projects that received funding assistance were: public wells, toilet facilities, mangrove replanting and school renovations.

Whilst diving, I saw little evidence of any obvious conservation measures. However, my own investigations showed that there are some past and ongoing initiatives That have been introduced by various organisations.

Turtle Conservation

This is probably the most pertinent issue. As the turtle population declines around the world, it is vital that these majestic creatures are protected. There are signs that North Sulawesi is helping in this respect.

One recent article I discovered, concerns the illegal trade in sea turtles that takes place in Manado market. The turtles are sold live to anyone prepared to buy them.



The Buddhist Monks of Manado

Enter the local Buddhist monks. The turtle is considered a sacred animal by the Buddhists. The local monks make trips to the market and buy the live turtles, and after a short blessing release them back in to the big blue of Manado Bay.

Gangga Island Resort Initiative

Turtles lay their eggs on the shore at the resort. As soon as evidence of a fresh nest is confirmed, the resort places a fence around the nest with an explanatory notice. Another initiative carried out by the resort involves organising sessions for the local children to spend a day in the resort where they receive basic education in to why conservation and preservation is important. To underline the message the kids are then taken for a snorkel over a local reef to see first hand, the beauty of the reef and marine life.

Sometimes turtles that have convalesced on the island are released back in to the sea as the grande finale to the local children's visit.

Generally

There was also anecdotal evidence to suggest that local fishing villages were being encouraged financially to sell any turtles or turtle eggs back to local conservation lists so that the turtles could be re-introduced to the sea or the eggs monitored and the hatchlings helped on their way to their natural habitat.

Marine Environment Education Centre (MEEC) & WWF- Indonesia Initiative

This year, a formal request for funding has been submitted to WWF-Indonesia to enable a turtle hatchery to be constructed. This project is modelled on a similar project that has been a success at Pemuteran Bay in Bali.

If financed by WWF-Indonesia, this initiative will provide the first scientifically coordinated ecological project in which visitors will be able to participate in and help increase the turtle population in the park. The project will also provide valuable scientific data on the local turtle population

Coral Regeneration

Like most reefs in tropical seas, the coral in parts of Sulawesi has been affected by global warming, but not as pronounced as say, the Maldives was a few years ago.

There is an interesting initiative at Fukui in the Bunaken National Park. Here large artificial 'snowflakes' have been arranged underwater to stimulate the growth of new corals. 300 ecoreef modules made from non-toxic ceramic have been used to re-create a reef system that was previously destroyed. The task of placing the 'snowflakes' took place in 2004. There are now signs of encrusting coralline algae, bryozoans, tunicates and signs of early coral growth on these 'snowflakes'. The original estimate was 5 years from placement before any significant regeneration of marine life becomes evident.



Dive Centre Initiative

This year, we noticed a new dive boat under construction at Thalassa Dive centre. the boat is being built by using traditional materials. This stuck me as being an initiative as it provided work for the locals who are constructing the boat using basic tools rather than energy-intensive industrial processes and are using local materials in the construction.



Pearl Farming off Popo Village

A structured approach to sustainable pearl farming was observed at Popo, which is also a popular dive site with visitors wishing to spot the elusive rinophias fish, sea horses and other rare critters.



Main working platform



Satellite rafts for pearl cultivation



Pearl cultivation under the satellite rafts

British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow Award

This award was presented in 2003 in recognition to the work that the Bunaken Management Board and the North Sulawesi Watersports Association (NSWA) had done to reduce destructive practices such as dynamite and cyanide fishing, whilst at the same time, improving the livelihood of 30,000 villagers within the Bunaken National Park, by training and Introduction to other alternative means of fishing and income generation.

Plans For The Future

It is widely recognised that some form of structured management of the region's natural wonders below the waves and on land are required for the future.

Eco-tourism is minimal in the area at present, if compared with other regions around the world. The worst thing that could happen is that diving and eco-tourists start to visit in larger numbers, which if not managed correctly would create a short-term financial boost for the region, followed by decimation of what can only be described as a world-class dive and nature destination.

On a positive note, North Sulawesi and Bunaken National Marine Park we being nominated in early 2005 as a natural world heritage site. This process can take up to 18 months. Lets hope the bid is successful and the terms that go with the title force the conservation plans to speed up and become more visible to the eco-traveller.

North Sulawesi Provincial Sustainable Tourism Working Group

There are signs that the Indonesian government are waking up to their responsibilities. In 2004, a North Sulawesi Provincial Sustainable Tourism Working Group was formed With members drawn from the tourism offices of the province, local districts and cities, the North Sulawesi Water Sports Association, The Pacific-Asia Travel Association, the local universities tourism and coastal management departments, Bunaken management board and local leaders of the coastal communities.

Their objective is to define a vision for sustainable tourism, and the strategies to achieve this objective.

In conclusion, build on the good work previously carried out and start seriously managing the asset that is North Sulawesi and the Bunaken National Park now, or there will be no asset to manage in the future.

Related Links

North Sulawesi Water sports Association

www.bunaken.info

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sophie@seahorse-media.co.uk

www.seahorse-media.co.uk