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NEWS

Sharks Sanctuary And Marine Conservation Area Created In Raja Ampat, Indonesia

By Matt J. Weiss, November 29, 2010 @ 05:28 PM (EST)

There was some big news announced last week while DPG was at DEMA. A number of groups, including our friends at Misool Eco Resort, are working hard to protect Raja Ampat, one of the most cherished destinations for underwater photographers. Their efforts have paid off, with all 17,760 square miles of Raja Ampat being declared a Shark Sanctuary and 468 sq miles being declared a Marine Conservation Area (MCA).

The entire region being designated a shark sanctuary provides full protection for sharks, manta rays, mobulas, dugongs, and turtles, and also removes destructive practices like dynamite fishing. The 468 sq miles that are an MCA take the protections a step further, prohibiting the kill, capture, or removal of any wildlife.

Below are press releases about both the Shark Sanctuary and the MCA. Read on and feel a little better about your day!

Part 1 - The Shark Sanctuary

Misool Eco Resort and Shark Savers announced that a Shark Sanctuary has been declared for the entire 17,760 square miles of Raja Ampat, Indonesia. Bupati Drs Marcus Wanma, the Regent of Raja Ampat, made this historic declaration, demonstrating leadership in marine conservation.

The Raja Ampat Shark Sanctuary provides full protection for sharks, manta rays, mobulas, dugongs, and turtles. Also prohibited are highly destructive practices including reef bombing and the aquarium fish trade. The Shark Sanctuary is the first of its kind in Indonesia, the largest island archipelago in the world.

The Shark Sanctuary declaration is in direct response to a campaign mounted by Shark Savers, an international shark conservation organization, in partnership with Misool Eco Resort (MER). The campaign won the support of over 8,500 divers and conservationists, with hundreds of tourism and diving companies and NGOs from around the world.

"This new Shark Sanctuary owes its creation to thousands of ocean advocates who expressed the urgent need to protect sharks, mantas, and other marine life," stated Michael Skoletsky, Executive Director of Shark Savers. "Divers experience the oceans from the inside and are increasingly taking responsibility for ocean and shark conservation. Underwater ecotourism is a vital tool to counter the rampant exploitation of the world's remaining sharks and bio-rich marine ecosystems."

The Raja Ampat Shark Sanctuary is expected to attract additional underwater eco-tourism, which will bring economic benefit to Raja Ampat's people while offsetting the cost to enforce the new wildlife protections. Shark Savers will play an ongoing role to mobilize continued support of divers and conservationists to fund long-term enforcement in the Shark Sanctuary.

The new Shark Sanctuary builds upon previous conservation achievements that protect vital coral reef and mangrove habitats. Conservation International (CI) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) worked with the Raja Ampat government to create seven Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in 2007, which CI and TNC maintain and enforce.

In 2005, Misool Eco Resort (MER) created the 164 sq mi Misool Marine Conservation Area (MCA) to protect sharks as well as reefs, in partnership with local Misool villages, WildAid and Coral Reef Alliance. Today, MER also announced the expansion of its MCA to 468 square miles and the Daram islands. All of these MPAs and the MCA lie within the Shark Sanctuary.

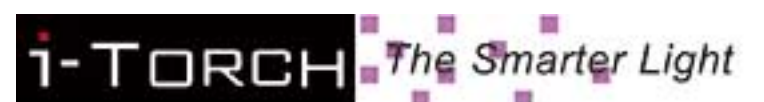
"Our MCA is constantly patrolled with the help of grants from WildAid and Coral Reef Alliance, enabling shark numbers to increase dramatically," said Andrew Miners of MER. "To achieve similar success, the new Shark Sanctuary will require a broad coalition of these great conservation organizations - CI, TNC, CORAL, WildAid, and Shark Savers - together with local communities, the Regency government, and the tourism industry."

Raja Ampat enjoys the highest marine biodiversity level on the planet with 1397 species of fish and over

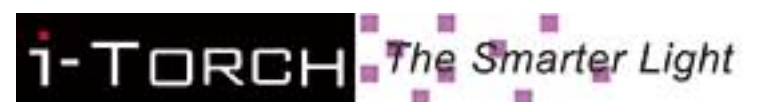
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600 species of coral recorded. It has also been the scene of destructive overfishing that has severely threatened sharks, mantas, and other vulnerable species.

Sharks, as apex predators, play a vital role in regulating the health of important commercial fish species, population balance, and coral reefs. Despite this importance, up to 73 million sharks are killed annually with some shark populations declining by as much as 90%, mostly for shark fin soup. In Raja Ampat, three fourths of its shark species are threatened with local extinction.

"Sharks are being killed for their fins, mantas are being killed for their gills, and rare reef fish are being caught for aquariums", said Peter Knights, Executive Director of WildAid. "It's tragic that so much of Raja Ampat's biological treasure is destined for consumers who are unaware of the impact." WildAid and Shark Savers also work together on media campaigns to curb the consumption of shark fin soup. The organizations believe in addressing both the demand and supply sides of the problem in order to stop the eradication of sharks.

Part 2: The MCA

Misool Eco Resort and WildAid announced today the creation of a 468 sq mile (1220 sq km) Marine Conservation Area in Raja Ampat, Indonesia. This has nearly tripled Misool Eco Resort's 164 sq mile (425 sq km) No-Take Zone, established in 2005. The combined Marine Conservation Area (MCA) now includes an adjoining archipelago of islands called Daram.

The MCA prohibits the kill, capture, or removal of any wildlife. Prohibitions include shark finning, all types of fishing, hunting turtles, and collecting turtle eggs, as well as highly destructive practices such as reef bombing, cyanide fishing, and live reef fish trade.

Misool Eco Resort's MCA is centered on an eco-region of global importance, linking diverse habitats such as mangroves, shallow reefs, deep sea beds, sea mounts, and coastal regions. The MCA lies just outside the traditional fishing grounds of the local villages. The villagers report increased catches in these fishing grounds as a direct result of protections in the adjacent MCA.

"In the context of my work with Conservation International in Raja Ampat, I have dived the spectacular reefs in the vicinity of Misool Eco Resort several times each year since 2003. During this time, the passionate efforts of Misool Eco Resort and its local Ranger Patrol to protect these world-class reefs have been highly successful in improving the fish biomass in the area and bringing an end to previously rampant destructive fishing practices," stated Dr Mark Erdmann. "I've noticed a dramatic increase in the number of snappers, groupers, and Napoleon wrasse on these reefs since the implementation of their innovative community agreement for a no-fishing zone in the area. Perhaps most heartening of all, in the past year alone I've seen more sharks within the MCA boundaries than I had seen in the preceding 6 years' combined."

Raja Ampat enjoys the highest marine biodiversity level on the planet, with 1397 species of fish and over 600 species of coral recorded. It is widely believed that coral species in this area are more resistant to bleaching, making them of particular interest as water temperatures are set to rise. In the past, Raja Ampat has been the scene of destructive overfishing that has severely threatened sharks, turtles, dugongs, manta rays, as well as fish the local population depends upon for food.

Raja Ampat's spectacular biodiversity and pristine landscapes have established the area as one of the most highly sought-after dive destinations in the world. The MCA secures the future of low impact underwater eco-tourism, which directly benefits Raja Ampat's people while safeguarding its spectacular natural resources.

"We are extremely fortunate to have such visionary community leaders as our partners. Through our joint efforts we are safeguarding the fabulous biodiversity upon which we all depend," said Andrew Miners of Misool Eco Resort. "By patrolling this MCA together, we can protect the area and pass on a thriving ecosystem to their children."

The expansion of the Misool Eco Resort's MCA is a direct result of the success of Misool Eco Resort's original No-Take Zone. A locally-staffed Ranger Patrol enforces the perimeters and is funded by Misool Eco Resort, WildAid, The Coral Reef Alliance, and many generous private donors.

Today, Misool Eco Resort and Shark Savers, an international shark conservation organization, also announced that the Regent of Raja Ampat has declared a Shark Sanctuary for the entire 15,000 square miles of Raja Ampat. The Shark Sanctuary provides full protection from fishing for sharks, manta and mobula rays, dugongs, and turtles. The Misool Eco Resort's MCA lies within the new Shark Sanctuary and will serve as a model for enforcement through community engagement.

"Misool Eco Resort is defining how effective ocean conservation gets done with their Marine Conservation Area," said Michael Skoletsky, Executive Director of Shark Savers. "Enlist and integrate local communities into the outcome. Partner with NGOs for management, assessment, enforcement assistance, and funding. Engage government to establish legal authority and leadership as it has with the Raja Ampat Shark Sanctuary. Misool Eco Resort has set an example by using highly responsible underwater eco-tourism as the vehicle for making conservation practical."

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A promotional graphic for Dive Counters Alliance. It features two identical panels side-by-side. Each panel shows a man in a wetsuit and scuba gear (Peter A. Hughes) at the top. Below him is a blue background with a white sailboat. The text reads: "Best Live-Aboards!" and "Best Destinations!". A list of destinations follows: Galapagos, Bay Islands, Philippines, Socorro, Maldives, Indonesia, and Guadalupe. At the bottom, the logo for "DIVEN COUNTERS ALLIANCE" is displayed with the tagline "experience • knowledge • service".

Peter A. Hughes, Founder

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