

# A SHELTER FOR SHARKS

Indonesia declares a new sanctuary for sharks and rays in one of the world's most biodiverse ecosystems

By Shawn Heinrichs



**opposite page:** Raja Ampat, Indonesia, has quickly become one of the world's most sought-after dive destinations

**this page:** A blacktip reef shark cruises the shallows of the new shark sanctuary, safe at last in waters that once ran red with shark's blood

■ It was like nothing he had ever experienced before: vibrant, bursting with life, pristine and perfect in almost every way. On a personal quest to find a sheltered place, unspoiled by the progression of civilisation, Andy Miners, a seasoned dive guide from the UK, had chosen Indonesia as his base and had explored just about all the diving that the region had to offer. But it was not until he discovered the reefs of Southeast Misool, hidden away in a corner of Raja Ampat in the Papua region of eastern Indonesia, that something deep in Miners' core told him his search was over. He had found his home. And Miners knew his mission: to do all he could to protect this place.

Embracing the Papuan laws of Indonesia, which recognise traditional and exclusive ownership of marine zones to local villages, Miners established connections with several of these communities and negotiated a lease for an island, 168 square miles of water and the resources beneath. He and a small group of supporters then built Misool Eco Resort entirely out of recovered wood, using (and now continuing to use) all local labour. They manage the resource as a No-Take Zone, and with the support of their partner WildAid, patrol the area with a team of local rangers. In only five years, blacktip reef sharks have returned to the region—an astounding example of resiliency, considering that the resort was built on the site of a former shark-finning camp.

Misool has quickly become one of the most desired dive destinations in the world, largely based on Miners' work and that of a small group of like-minded people. The new economy provides not only

sustainable jobs and public works in the local villages where local fisheries have severely declined, but protects the resource for the recovery of the fisheries themselves. In a testament to the success of this project, Mark Erdmann of Conservation International observed: "In the context of my work with Conservation International in Raja Ampat, I have dived the spectacular reefs in the vicinity of the 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."

The remarkable example set by Misool helps set the stage for more widespread conservation efforts in Indonesia and demonstrates how marine reserves can restore both the environment and the local economy. "We're helping to protect the birthright of these children," Miners says, "and so we play a small part in protecting the ocean itself for future generations." He sweeps his arm, indicating the crowd of laughing children, all eyes flashing, all jumping off the crude dock into the water and climbing back up the pylons to do it again.

### **Daram Dreams**

But Miners' work was not yet done and in October 2010, after more than a year's negotiation with the local villages, he signed another lease with Misool Eco Resort for a chain of islands known as Daram.



## **Sharks are being killed for their fins, mantas are being killed for their gills, and rare reef fish are being caught for aquariums**

The unique beauty of Daram is overwhelming. The main islands are heavily forested with old-growth hardwood trees reaching out from the thick jungle canopy. White sand beaches fade into the turquoise waters. Approaching the islands, sea eagles hail you as they circle and dive, while hawksbill and green turtles peer up from the water with curiosity. Stretching northeast, limestone islets jut from the sea like ancient fortresses, worn by the ages. This beauty is only surpassed by what lies below the surface. An extensive labyrinth of reefs rises to within metres of the surface, forming a multitude of pinnacles, ridges and plateaus. Ocean currents drive nutrient-rich waters across these features, feeding an unfathomable diversity and abundance of marine life. The splendour and complexity are almost impossible to comprehend. These are reefs from a time before we had badly damaged our oceans – vibrant and thriving reefs, perfect in every way.

The Daram chain more than doubles the size of the existing No-Take Zone. Funding from private foundations, WildAid, and generous private donors will support similar patrols and public works programmes in the villages. In collaboration with Conservation International and The Nature Conservancy, Miners and the team at Misool Eco Resort are working to employ key aspects of this model in other communities, with the goal of creating a network of similar marine conservation areas (MCAs) in Raja Ampat and other parts of Indonesia. But so much depends on the local will to protect what is essentially their natural heritage. "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 Miners. "By patrolling this MCA together, we can protect the area and pass on a thriving ecosystem to their children."

### **Eco-Expansion**

Building on the success of these marine protected areas, Miners arranged a meeting with top officials in the Raja Ampat regional government. Seizing the opportunity, Miners delivered a key media presentation created in collaboration with Shark Savers that included powerful video, striking images, definitive studies and a petition with one thousand signatures supporting the critical need to conserve sharks and rays in Raja Ampat. Miners put forward a formal request to the Regent to issue a decree banning shark and manta fishing in

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**right:** Not long ago, the waters of the new sanctuary were prime fishing grounds for shark finning. But the locals now have new sources of revenue, and the sharks in this area, at least, have a second chance





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all of Raja Ampat. This visionary legislation would lay the foundation needed to protect these threatened species throughout Raja Ampat.

Raja Ampat is believed to be home to the highest marine biodiversity on the planet with at least 1,397 species of fish and over 600 species of coral recorded. Historically it has also been the scene of destructive overfishing that has severely threatened sharks, mantas and other vulnerable species. "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."

The request was accepted and on November 16, 2010 Misool Eco Resort and Shark Savers announced that the Shark Sanctuary has been declared for the entire 15,000 square miles of Raja Ampat, Indonesia. Bupati Drs Marcus Wanma, the Regent of Raja Ampat, made this historic declaration, putting him at the forefront of marine conservation in Indonesia.

The Raja Ampat Shark Sanctuary provides full protection for sharks, manta rays, mobulas, dugongs and turtles. It also prohibits the highly destructive practices of reef bombing and the aquarium fish trade. The Shark Sanctuary is the first of its kind in Indonesia, which is the largest island archipelago in the world. The Shark Sanctuary declaration was in part driven by a campaign mounted by Shark Savers that won the support of over 8500 divers and conservationists, with hundreds of tourism and diving companies and NGOs from around the world.

### Sweet Success

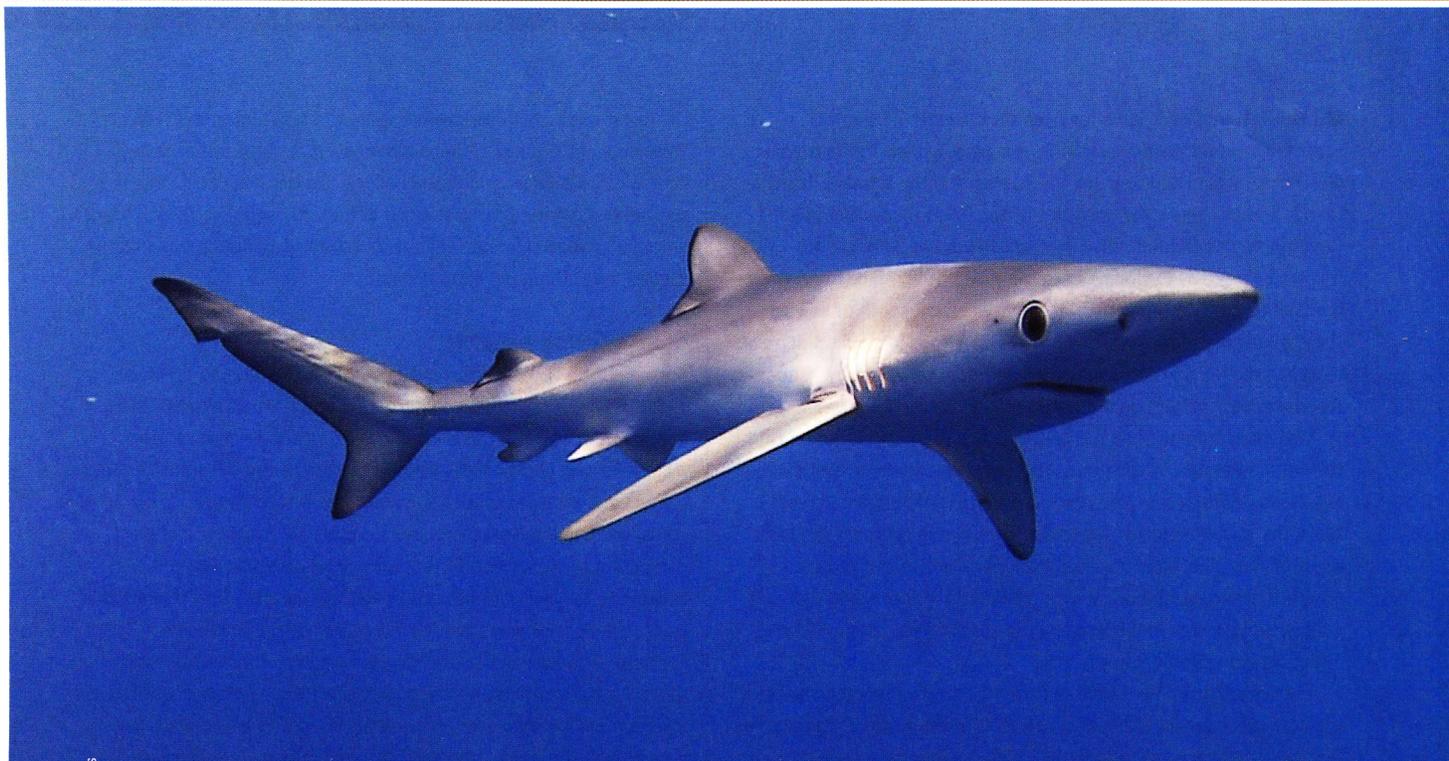
"This new shark sanctuary owes its creation to thousands of ocean advocates who expressed the urgent need to protect sharks, mantas, and other marine life," stated Michael Skoletsky, executive director of Shark Savers. "Divers experience the oceans from the inside and are increasingly taking responsibility 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."

With the sanctuary declared, Miners is ready for the next challenge in conserving Raja Ampat's incredible marine treasures. "Our MCA is constantly patrolled with support from WildAid and Coral Reef Alliance, enabling shark numbers to increase dramatically," said Miners. "To achieve similar success, the new Shark Sanctuary will require a broad coalition of these great conservation organisations together with local communities, the Regency government and the tourism industry."

Perhaps there is a lesson for all of here. In the case of Miners, a dream to protect a reef grew, inspired others to join the cause, and ultimately sparked the establishment of the first shark and ray sanctuary in all of Indonesia, a country that is consistently among the world's biggest shark and ray fishing nations. These victories demonstrate that we can make a difference in the face of insurmountable odds, and each of us can join a movement and collectively, create a voice that changes the world. [SDAA](#)



John Weiler



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**opposite page:** A sight to be forgotten: shark fins drying in the sun, awaiting export to markets like Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taipei  
**this page, from top:** Mantas also find protection under new legislation aimed at the protection of sharks | With the future assured, local shark populations now have a chance to recover from years of targeted fishing