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Some Good News: Raja Ampat Big-Fish Now Thriving

by [Burt Jones & Maurine Shimlock](#) • May 17, 2010 • [3 Comments](#)



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I heard from a few people who thought that my blog about illegal fishing Komodo National Park was depressing.

I agree. If we can't protect marine life in one of the world's most iconic parks, is there any hope?



Burt and I have been thinking about this problem for a long time, especially for the two years we have been living in Indonesia consulting with Conservation International. Our primary focus has been exploring new sites and photographing marine life in Raja Ampat, which has, in case you haven't read a dive publication in the last 5 years, more species of fish and coral than any other tropical reef system on the planet (up to 1352 fish species and still counting!).

We've been back a few weeks from our last R4 trip of the season ("ampat" means "four" in Bahasa Indonesia), a place where there are still new reefs to discover, new thrills to experience. Even though we wrote the guide to diving in R4, on this latest trip we dived several new (to us) sites. We concentrated mostly of on the Dampier Strait, perhaps the first area in R4 to be dived by tourists who began arriving and staying in primitive scuba camps about 15

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years ago. The most amazing thing about these new sites was the fish. It's hard to imagine what Raja's reef were like about 10 years ago when the first tourist divers saw them, but believe it or not, there's a lot of evidence that fish counts have risen steadily during this time.



Schools of bigger fish now thriving in Raja Ampat

Now I'm not talking just your usual (for R4) masses of fusiliers and surgeonfish. I'm talking a reef where hundreds of tuna flashed around making "fish thunder" (cavitation) as they were chased by meter-long Spanish Mackerel and even larger Dog Tooth Tuna. We also saw (and photographed) a type of scad (Jack family) that, according to Dr. Gerald Allen, had yet to be photographed underwater, as well as schools of barracuda, more trevally, several species of snapper, and, most surprisingly, several small black-tip and grey reef sharks. The sharks especially are very good news. The increased visibility of these top reef predators means that conservation is beginning to work in R4.

Why Raja Ampat? Why have conservation efforts been successful here? In our opinion, one major factor has been the NGO's attempts to involve local people in their programs. Locals are involved in community patrols, an educational vessel visits every village, conducts marine biology classes for kids and puts on shows at night for all the villagers. Radio programs sponsored by the NGOs are broadcast throughout the province informing locals about pending environmental issues. There has been a huge effort to integrate traditional practices into local conservation efforts, especially in the design of zonation systems for the marine protected areas, including

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“no-take’ zones.

But perhaps the most important factor has been the impressive increase in tourists, almost all divers, visiting Raja Ampat. In less than a decade rather spectacular results have been achieved. Raja Ampat received less than 300 travelers who based out of 1 resort or from 1 (seasonal) liveaboard dive boat in 2001. In 2009 over 4000 tourists traveled to Raja Ampat. Again, the vast majority were scuba divers who stayed at one of the region’s 6 land-based resorts or cruised the archipelago on one of more than 20 liveaboards. About half of their entry tag fee is slated for community development projects, so an increase in tourism directly benefits the villagers, who in turn, welcome more tourists.

Even the provincial government is impressed. The Bupati (the governor) of Raja Ampat just announced that he has charged his cabinet with developing green economic initiatives, and that ecotourism will receive top priority. In fact, the Bupati said publicly that Raja Ampat will no longer give out mining licenses, and will instead focus on developing marine tourism. This is **very** good news. And, while some of it can be chalked up to political posturing, the Bupati has been unusually succinct about his position.

Now, this doesn’t mean that environmental degradation has been eliminated completely. There are still hundreds if not thousands of transmigrants from other Indonesian island flocking to Raja Ampat.

These people need places to live, stores to buy stuff in, fish to eat and so on. Seasonal shark fishing camps still dot isolated islands outside of the archipelago’s protected areas. Most ominous, seismic surveys were recently conducted around Misool and Kofiau. Oil and gas leases are nationally, not regionally awarded concessions, so the provincial government of Raja Ampat may not have control over who drills for what where. Hopefully someone in the government will have an ”aha” moment and connect the US gulf coast’s disaster to a potential environmental catastrophe in R4.

Still, if there ever was a case to demonstrate that tourism can help conserve an ecosystem, Raja Ampat’s first decade as one of the world’s premier dive destinations has proven what can be accomplished. Please keep coming.

Burt and Maurine are authors of the recently published book *Diving*

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Indonesia's Raja Ampat, which is the definitive guide to that area and is available thru [Undercurrent's Books](#).



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John Bantin

May 17, 2010 at 1:03 pm

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David Espinosa

May 17, 2010 at 2:56 pm

Good stuff, you two! Nice to read that this hotspot isn't losing its luster; it's only getting shinier.



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Kerri Bingham

June 30, 2010 at 2:12 am

Love the article Burt and Maurine! Makes me want to get back there even more. And that's a great shot of the fish action in R4! Thanks for sharing 😊



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