

Eyes on the prize

Uninhibited feeding by whale sharks at fishing platforms off the coast of Papua province has created the ideal opportunity to get up close to one of the great wonders of the ocean.

Story and photography by **Thomas Haider**



A BAYFUL OF BOYS
Research reveals that the population of whale sharks in Cenderawasih Bay is quite large, amounting to 135 individuals. “Only four out of the total population are female, however,” says Evi Nurul Ihsan, WWF Indonesia’s monitoring and surveillance officer for the area.

THE FISHERMEN OF CENDERAWASIH Bay, on the north coast of western New Guinea, spend much of their lives on floating bamboo platforms called *bagans*. Among their quarry are tiny *ikan puri*, anchovies, netted by the ton and strung onto lines to catch more lucrative fare such as bonito. But a net bulging with these tiny fish also attracts whale sharks, and this is now providing the fishermen with an unexpected source of bounty – ecotourism.

In early 2006, expeditions led by Conservation International (CI) and WWF-Indonesia in Cenderawasih Bay revealed that the lift-net fishers operating in the bay had daily encounters with whale sharks. Raising their nets in the morning, they bait their lines with some of the anchovies and leave the rest in the net, hanging just beneath the platform. Whale sharks have learned to suck these small fish from the nets making Cenderawasih the first place in the world where such behaviour has been documented.

The fishermen also feed them bucketloads of anchovies directly. Some say they do this because the sharks represent ancestors; others more pragmatically explain that if the whale sharks congregate around their bagans, that attracts skipjack tuna, spanish mackerel and sailfish

which the fishers catch on handlines.

Either way, today the whale sharks draw divers and snorkellers from around the world, eager for the near-guaranteed chance to see groups of them up close, jockeying for position around the nets. All visitors contribute a fee to the Cenderawasih village fund, which is then divided between the closest communities, the bagan fishermen, the park authority who monitor and protect whale sharks, and Nabire District, in the form of taxation.

A written code of conduct governs the arrangement, dictating even how the money is paid, with all parties present so as to discourage jealousy within the host community. It also advises on interaction with whale sharks in the water, asking tourism operators to tell their guests not to touch the animals.

Still more needs to be done to ensure the protection of the sharks, which are listed as Endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. In 2002 the bay became Indonesia’s largest marine park, but like many such parks around the region, monitoring and protection has been sporadic. Now Cenderawasih Bay National Park is working with WWF Indonesia to establish a whale shark sanctuary, so they can continue to thrive. **AA**



WHALE SPOTTING

Every whale shark has a unique pattern of spots and streaks. Once photographed they are added to a database that allows their movements to be tracked over time. This has helped researchers confirm that certain individuals are nearly always present in Cenderawasih Bay, while others come and go.



FOLLOWING THE FOOD

In most places where tourists interact with whale sharks (Ningaloo, Isla Mujeres, Donsol, Galapagos and others), the animals are seen only seasonally. They are believed to be migrating between ephemeral food sources such as fish and coral spawn, or plankton blooms.



NEAR-GUARANTEED ACCESS
Happily, the year-round abundance of anchovies in Cenderawasih and Kaimana seems to be sufficient to keep the sharks gulping them down day-in, day-out, no matter the time of year.



MALE PATTERN BOLDNESS?
Cenderawasih's aggregation of juvenile and young adult males is not unusual – most aggregations worldwide are the same. Females and younger males are almost never seen and large adults only rarely encountered in certain areas. Scientists assume they are spending time at depth, but no one knows for sure.



ONGOING RESEARCH
Conservation International has been working with the Cenderawasih Bay National Park Authority and the Indonesian Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries to tag the sharks since the end of 2015. They are also collaborating with Dr Hawis Madduppa of the Bogor Agricultural Institute (IPB) to examine the genetic connectivity of the populations in the Cenderawasih and Kaimana areas.

PRACTICALITIES

When to go

The sharks can be seen on a daily basis, all year round.

How to get there

Cenderawasih Bay is in the Indonesian province of West Papua, the westernmost portion of New Guinea. Most visitors access this area by liveaboard. Alternatively, you can try Triton Bay Dive Resort in Kaimana on the southern coast of West Papua where the sharks also congregate around bagans, though not as consistently as in the north. To reach Triton Bay, you have to fly via Ambon or Sorong.

Contacts

The many liveaboards plying the waters around Papua include:

- Ondina, www.thebestdivingintheworld.com
- Putiraja, www.putiraja.com
- Raja Ampat Aggressor, www.aggressor.com
- Waow, <http://waow.ch/>

Triton Bay Dive Resort, www.tritonbaydivers.com

The author thanks Subal Housings for their support in the shooting of this feature.