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The reefs are a nursery for fish like tuna. The strong currents mean spawn is distributed quickly; anything the Sulu Sea current passes through is enriched.

AN UNDER WATER NATIONAL TREASURE

Putting fish on the plates of Filipinos, and even of people in neighboring countries, ALYA HONASAN discovers how The Tubbataha Reef Natural Marine Park is much more than a divers' haven

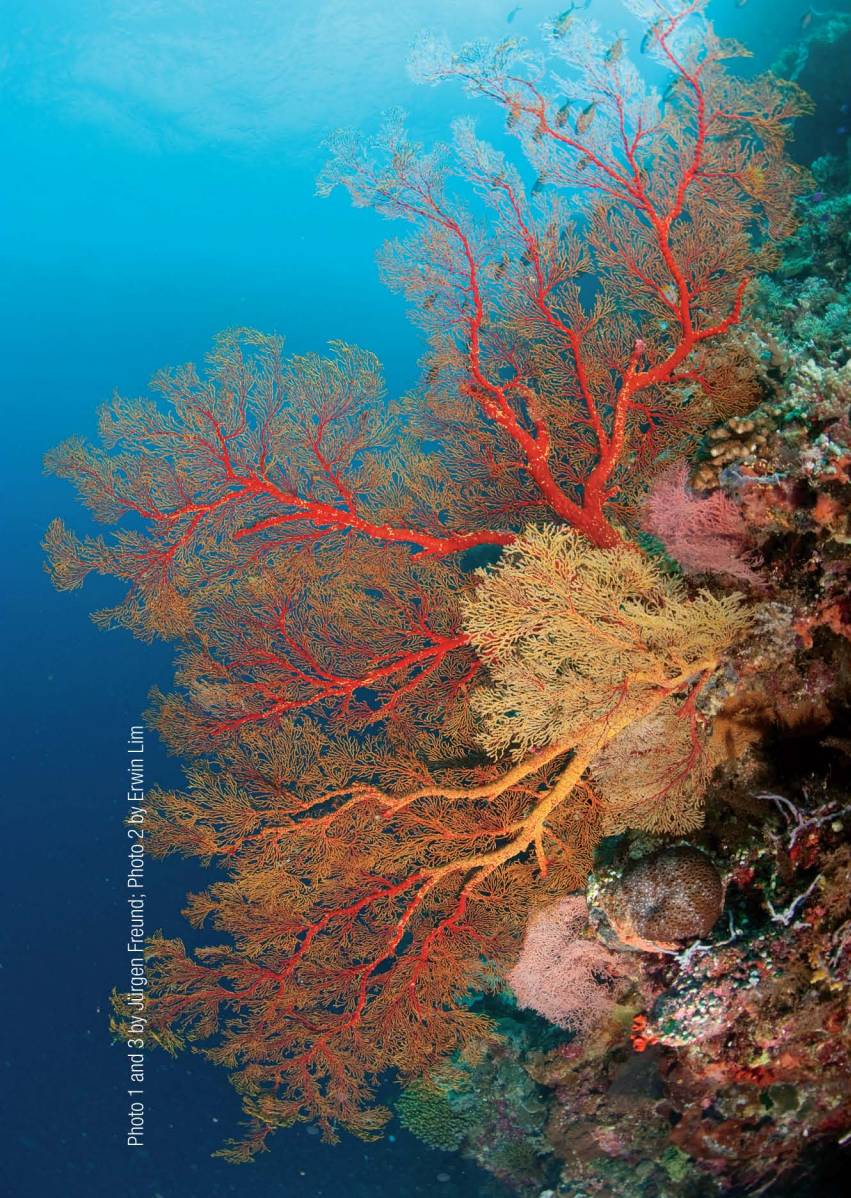


Photo 1 and 3 by Jürgen Freund; Photo 2 by Erwin Lim



One square kilometer of reefs yields 40 metric tons of seafood annually, but because Tubbataha has been around for a while, it yields seven times as much! The reef is home to unique marine life like fan coral, sea turtles and manta rays.

It was the kind of moment that passionate scuba divers live for. We were at about 65 feet at White Tip Alley, a dive site beside a wall on the north shoal of the Tubbataha Natural Marine Park in the Sulu Sea, some 150 km southeast of Puerto Princesa City in Palawan. Our group of about 10 divers was gliding slowly with the reef on our left side, and with the Marine Park's manager, Angelique Songco, in the lead.

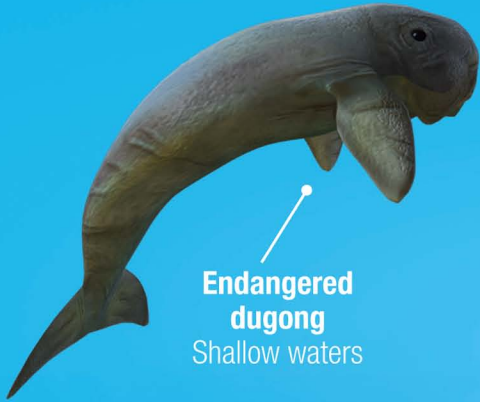
Suddenly Songco, who was on an inspection dive in the middle of the Philippine summer, raised her hand to signal a halt. There, about 10 feet in front of her, was a solitary manta ray, its graceful wings spanning about six feet, swimming slowly in our direction. About five feet away, it stopped, turned around, and began to lazily swim away—and that, I thought, was the end of it. Then, as if having second thoughts and realizing we meant it no harm, the ray spun around to face us again, lightly resting the tip of its right wing on a coral for a second, assessing the interlopers. Then it began to swim directly towards us, almost caressing Songco with its wing, and grazing the heads of several wide-eyed American divers. The whole thing took around five minutes, but the close encounter with a friendly and beautiful denizen of the deep was recorded for posterity on half a dozen cameras.

It was a typical encounter on a trip to Tubbataha, the Mecca of Philippine diving, a haven of charismatic marine life, and one of the most well-known dive sites in the

world. Accessible only by live-aboard dive boats during the Philippine summer months—between March and June—Tubbataha attracts local and international divers who pay top dollar, about US\$1,000 for a week-long trip, for the chance to see what the reefs can offer, earning good money for the Philippine tourism industry.

And they offer a lot. The manta ray is one of the myriad of creatures, including 11 species of sharks, over 600 species of fish, 360 species of coral, 12 kinds of whales and dolphins, and nesting green and hawksbill turtles, that have been spotted in these 97,000 hectares of reef, which include Tubbataha and the neighboring Jessie Beazley Reef. On my last trip before this one, a scalloped hammerhead swam alongside me for a few seconds at 60 feet; on the same trip, we spotted a 20-foot whale shark hugging a wall—so huge that its accompanying remora, fish that hitch a ride to pick and eat parasites off a bigger animal, were the size of small sharks.

It is because of this rich biodiversity that Tubbataha has been recognized as unique, and was declared a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco) on December 11, 1993—the only purely marine World Heritage Site in Southeast Asia. “For many, the existence of a site of ecological and aesthetic value is adequate justification for its conservation,” says Songco. “For Filipinos, it is a source of pride that the only



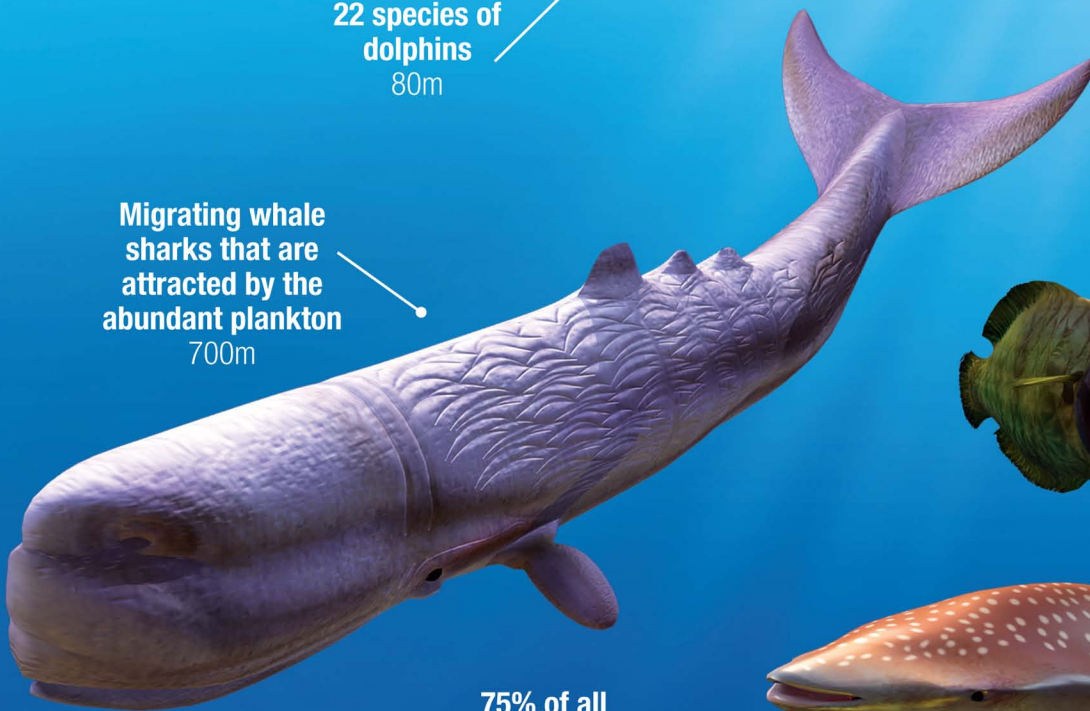
Endangered dugong
Shallow waters



22 species of dolphins
80m



Six of the world's seven species of marine turtles
Mostly found in shallow seagrass and coral beds



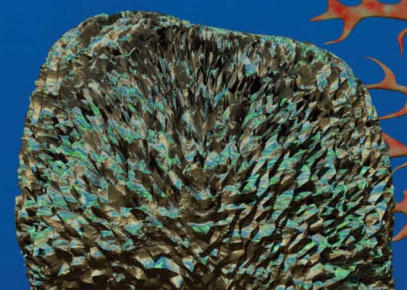
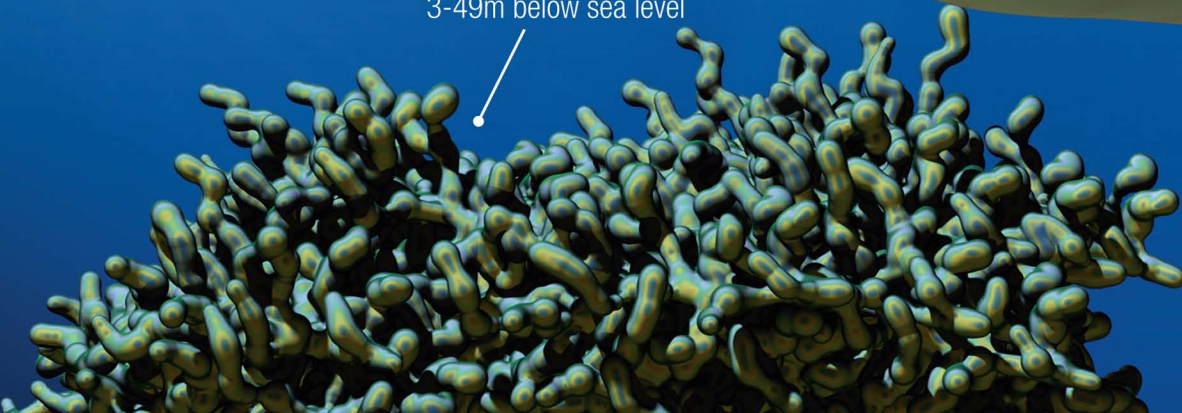
Migrating whale sharks that are attracted by the abundant plankton
700m



More than 3,000 species of reef fish and pelagic species
1-500m below sea level



75% of all coral species
3-49m below sea level





Migrating manta rays that are attracted by the abundant plankton
10-20m below sea level

Problems facing Tubbataha include poachers, pollution and climate change. A 2 to 3 degree change in the world's oceans' temperatures will mean immense loss of biodiversity.

purely marine World Heritage Site in Southeast Asia is found in this country." On a national level, Tubbataha became the Philippines' first Marine Protected Area (MPA) on August 11, 1988, when then President Corazon Aquino created the Tubbataha Reef Natural Marine Park, which means that absolutely no fishing is allowed in these waters.

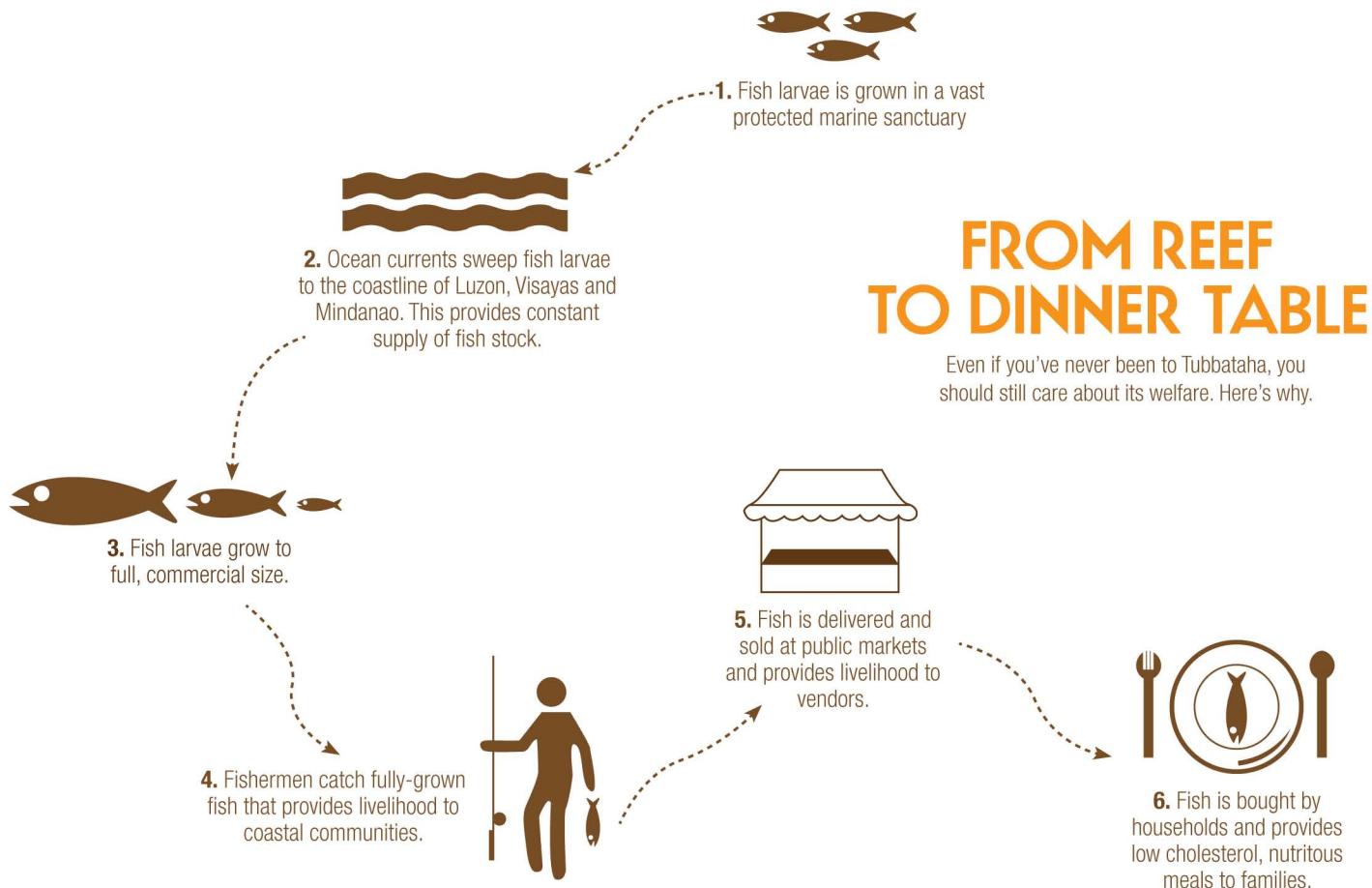
The limitation is a justifiable one, because many charismatic and important species here are already at risk. The green (*Chelonia mydas*) and hawksbill (*Eretmochalys imbricata*) turtles are both classified as endangered, while the majestic whale shark (*Rhincodon typus*) and manta rays are now protected, their killing officially banned by Fisheries Administrative Order 193, issued on March 25, 1998.

Despite the restrictions, however, Tubbataha continues to give, providing food for the entire Philippine archipelago as well as the region. The constant flow of currents through this spawning area and "nursery" for all kinds of life distributes fish and coral larvae for thousands of miles. That's also because Tubbataha and the Sulu Sea sit right smack in the middle of the hotbed of biodiversity known as the Coral Triangle, six million square kilometers stretching through the waters of the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Timor Leste.

"Because it is a major source of fish and coral larvae in the Sulu Sea, it enriches fisheries in the surrounding areas," says Songco. "Marine ecosystems do not have boundaries, so the abundance of specific areas is transmitted to others." In short, you may never dive Tubbataha, but chances are, the fish you are having for dinner was spawned and grew in its waters.

Thus, as both a food source and national ecological treasure, it is important that people understand Tubbataha's significance. "Information and marine law enforcement efforts are intensified so people can appreciate the reefs' value," says Songco, who heads a team of Marine Park Rangers from the Philippine Navy, the Coast Guard, her own Tubbataha Management Office, and the municipality of Cagayancillo, who patrol the reefs against illegal fishermen. They are currently dealing with an infestation of coral-eating crown-of-thorns starfish that can only be extricated manually, and perform other conservation duties on the side, like reef monitoring and turtle tagging. "These activities are supported by NGOs, the provincial government of Palawan, and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources." The park fees paid by visiting dive boats also contribute a good amount to park management's coffers, so keeping the reefs healthy means the divers keep coming—and Songco's team will continue to have funds to keep operations on track.

Although it's the divers who will get to see this park at its most dramatic, Tubbataha's importance demands recognition—and action— from every Filipino. "Obviously, not everyone can directly participate in the conservation of Tubbataha," notes Songco. "But the cause of marine conservation can best be served if people will educate themselves on the issues that beleaguer our oceans." There are many



FROM REEF TO DINNER TABLE

Even if you've never been to Tubbataha, you should still care about its welfare. Here's why.

things the average Juan can do to help, she insists. "Most garbage thrown on land ends up in the sea. Reducing the generation of waste and disposing of it properly will lessen the impact of such debris on marine mammals, seabirds, and other organisms. Encourage friends and family to support protection efforts by paying conservation fees in marine reserves, following guidelines, and making contributions in whatever form, whether technical or financial."

After all, Songco says, Tubbataha is nature's gift to the Filipino people, and is, in turn, our own splendid gift to the world. "The protection of Tubbataha is the Philippines' contribution to global conservation goals." 🌊

For more information on the Coral Triangle, check out http://blogs.panda.org/coral_triangle/

GETTING THERE

Tubbataha is 12 to 20 hours by boat from Palawan.

WHEN TO GO

March to May

TIP

Tubbataha Reef entails a technical dive. "Diving here is quite difficult," says WWF Information Officer Gregg Yan. "In fact, with the strong undercurrents rushing through the atoll formations, sometimes it's as if you're running underwater."



Park manager Angelique Songco collecting crown-of-thorns starfish from the reef.