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Dear Dive buddies,

The Seven Seas is back in Raja Ampat now for the next few months and this newsletter reminds you of some last minute deals for that area. Also a reminder of our photo competition (bottom of newsletter) for which we have started to receive some very nice entries. Mark Heighes wrote his trip report from the recent Raja Ampat to Banda Sea cruise for which Robert Delfs provided the photographs. Note the section on the grouper and snapper spawning aggregations at Koon, one of the very last such aggregations in Indonesia, heavily fished and in urgent need of protection!



"Too Many Fish" - By Mark Heighes with Images by Robert Delfs

Last month I took the opportunity to join the Seven Seas on a trip from Sorong to Ambon as a guest. Usually I would be leading such an expedition but as Stew Esposito was already onboard

leading trips in the area and doing a mighty fine job of it, I took the back seat and tried not to do any driving, if you know what I mean.

Onboard were my Aunt and Uncle Ron and Val Taylor my friends and co owners of Seven Seas Jos and Lida Pet, our most capped guest and also good friend Robert Delfs along with other repeat shipmates such Ed and Ann Norton and Mickey Rosenau and Ellen Gritz. So with that crowd I knew that even if for some unforeseen reason, we did not do a single dive, we were still in for a good time.



First stop out of Sorong was Kri Point in Raja Ampat, where the diving was so good that we stayed on the same site all day. Next stop was Melissa's Garden as we had a request for a Wobbegong Shark which Melissa delivered on the very first dive. That afternoon we did some exploration on North West Batanta and found a very interesting new site there. From there we ran all the way south to Misool and the next day did the underwater and above water caves in the Furundi area. The skull cave turned out to be one of the trip's highlights for my uncle Ron. We stayed in the Furundi area the following day to dive some new sites further east that Jos and myself had discovered 5 years ago and had not returned to since. We were not to be disappointed as these proved to be just as good as we remembered.

As Tommy and Stew had the group under their wing it gave Jos and myself the opportunity to explore in the zodiac and find even more stunning new sites. In the process I was approached by and had close encounters with 3 bottlenose dolphins while snorkeling a potential site in the group. The following day we snorkeled with false killer whales and had a somewhat curious individual come in for a closer look at us which kept us nervously clinging to the ropes of the zodiac. After that some really excellent dives around twin peaks and the windy ridge in the Fiabacet area and on our explorations we found a new seamount dive with clouds of fish including a Queensland giant grouper and a manta ray hovering over a cleaning station.

Soon it was time to leave Misool and head for the crystal clear waters Banda Sea, but not before

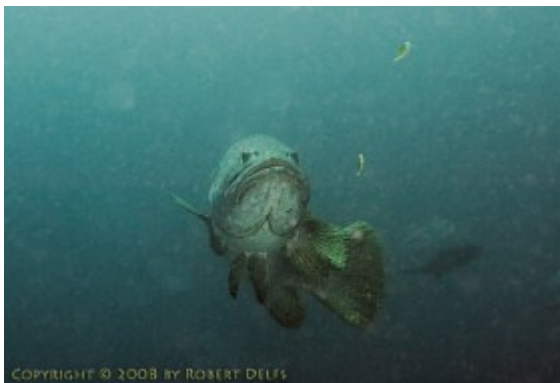
stopping at a site appropriately named about 17 years ago by the late Larry Smith as "Too Many Fish".

The site is situated near the island of Koon which lies at the south eastern most point of an extensive reef system that extends east off Seram. I first swam into "Too Many Fish" 15 years ago while leading a group of divers on Lawrence Blair's "Return to the Ring of Fire" expedition. The site was absolutely amazing, swarming with great numbers of just about every fish one could imagine. The corals both hard and soft were stunning and I ranked the site as the best dive in Indonesia. That dive still ranks as the best dive I have ever had as I enter my 27th year of diving in Indonesia.

We arrived after a calm overnight passage from Misool. I was eager to see how the site was holding up after not having dived at it for the last two years and previously finding unexploded bombs in the area. Knowing that there has been under pressure of increased fishing over the last ten years, and more recently the construction of cold storage facility conveniently located on a nearby island, was also of great concern.

Well...let me tell you I was pleasantly surprised. It was the day before new moon and the first time I had visited the site in this moon phase for several years. There was a good current running and fish were everywhere. The numbers and variety of resident reef fish were down, possibly due to loss of habitat, but snapper and grouper had obviously moved in to spawn during the new moon. Schools of snappers included Humpback, Sail fin, Midnight, Yellowtail, One Spot, Paddle tail, and a good number of Mangrove Jacks.

There were several grouper species around but most impressive was the large aggregation of coral trout, *Plectropomus areolatus*, the largest aggregation of these fish that we have seen recently in Indonesia. No less than three Giant Queensland Grouper patrolled the scene. We also had Dogtooth Tuna, Barracuda, a school of Big Eye Jacks and some Giant Trevally hanging around. To top it all off a Manta and a spawning group of wrasse just towards the end of the dive.



Needless to say we dived the site all day and at sunset sailed into the Banda Sea knowing that this, probably, is one of the most important spawning aggregation sites in Indonesia that is still productive. For how long is uncertain. The area is under threat and I fear that without awareness and the introduction of regulations such as no take zones etc., "Too Many Fish", which still

delivers, may have to be renamed "Not Any Fish Anymore" in the not too distant future. We decided to write to all the large conservation NGOs about this, which have all publicly spoken about the need to protect these sites but may not have any included in their programs yet.

Our next stop was the Banda Islands before sailing to Nusa Laut and Ambon.

That's another story. We spent 3 days diving beautiful walls in crystal blue water on 8 of the 9 islands in the group islands in the group. There is no place in the world anything like Banda so that one you will have to see for yourself, that is, if you haven't already been. For sure spend some time at Run Island, the Northwest corner with stunning reef-crest and schools of fish including a group of 8 Napoleon wrasse were absolutely great. The South East point was another fantastic dive here, all within 5 minutes by speedboat from our lovely anchorage in front of the Southern beach.

At Banda Neira we visited the sites and interacted with some of our local friends, in between dives at Batu Kapal with Hammerhead shark, and mcuk dives with mandarin fish and mimic octopus. With Des Alwi and friends we had a great party in board while bartering our fresh fish (wahoo and tuna) against avocados with Des, who wore his old Portugese helmet for the



occasion. Our project the Seven Seas School Shuttle in Banda is now sending 44 children to school that otherwise would not be attending school at all. We have funding for another year and as we enter our 3rd year of the program we are now looking into starting up a scholarship program for the kids that excel. Thank you to those who contributed this year and in previous years. If you would like to know more about this program please contact Lida Pet via Sevenseas.expeditions@gmail.com referring to Seven Seas Banda School Program.

Almost forgot: our last day of diving was at Nusa Laut and we were blown away! Not by the current but by the fantastic scenery of coral bommies surrounded by white sand patches in clear water with incredible schools of reef fish in all sizes and of all possible sorts. Including Titan trigger that put his teeth through Jos's fin, boot AND foot. Valerie Taylor said it best: "Why don't we spend AT LEAST 3 or 4 days just here?" Well, no more time Val, time to start planning another cruise, this one is over Looking forward to see you on board for our next adventure!

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