

Doomed fishermen

by Michael Jacques

This article is condensed from the magazine Pacific below. In it, Michael Jacques describes the almost suicidal diving practices employed by the live reef fish divers he and his companions encountered near Dangar Island, near Sumbawa, eastern Indonesia. Jacques rightly stresses the need for education. In the article that follows this one, Johannes and Djohani relate their encounter with a bent live fish diver and his community, which suggests, however, that education alone will not always be the answer.

Suddenly we were cold and wet, working sails and sheets. Dangar Island and the stark relief of Sumbawa beckoned us. We crept into a small anchorage just SW of Dangar Island. We found ourselves surrounded by jagged low peaks. Surveying the scene we noticed outpost holding tanks for the live fish trade, suspended by drums and bamboo. We saw and heard the boats returning to the Bugis village. The original Indonesian seafarers, and occasional pirates, these people had transmigrated some time ago from South Sulawesi and established themselves in this massive, rich bay known as Teluk Saleh.

Here they encountered a new and unfamiliar adversary.

It came from the North, bringing with it commercialism, materialism and greed. It came in the form of wealthy financiers seeking to fill the restaurants of Singapore and Hong Kong with prized live reef fish species attracting incredible prices in those countries, and creating more individual wealth. We knew it had a disregard for the fish and the reef that sheltered them.

We were soon to find out, first hand, that this disregard extended to human life as well. Samsara visited early the following morning, preceded by the splutter of his motor. He eyed us curiously, and when beckoned to come aboard in a familiar tongue, he joined us. He had been fishing all night. His story-filled hands eagerly accepted strong coffee, to which he added the traditional half kilo of sugar.

His face shrouded in a black balaclava, he told us how he came to be in Teluk Saleh. He told us of his catch, his life and his family. He told us of the reef, the fishing, and marvelled at our charts of his home. Significant to this story, he told us of the live fish trade, where to find the divers, and, darker side, human cost.

We upped anchor, following Samsara's directions, beginning what turned out to be a very short

search for the live fish divers. Rounding a small headland, were greeted by a massive sparkling bay. Dotted all over the bay were small boats, compressors chugging, their bright yellow hoses snaking into the sea.

We approached one boat. Our polite question of 'can we dive with you?' was met with a firm no, and a tug on the hose bringing the diver to the surface. The boat quickly moved off to another location. We decide to assemble equipment and cameras in an attempt to generate a little more curiosity. Apparently this was what was required. The next team, slightly younger, greeted our suggestion with enthusiasm, eager to display their diving prowess.

Taking a closer look at their vessel we noted it was completely open. A small tank housed the catch. The boat was made of fibreglass and numbered as part of a fleet of similar vessels. A surface supply unit was situated aft of the holding tank. This was obviously part of a well-organised, well-financed operation. We determined that the divers were working in teams of two, alternating diving and tending the compressor.

The water was heavily silted, shafts of light strobed downward. Only our depth sounder indicated that the bottom lay 60 to 90 feet (20 to 30 metres) below us. We donned our equipment. The contrast between our gear (the latest in buoyancy compensating devices, decompression computers and safety equipment) and that of the Indonesian divers (a mask with hose fitted into it, surface supply unit, lead sheet wrapped around rope, shorts and T-shirt) was truly eye-opening.

We descended below the vessel, and waited, the bottom contours coming into view. The coral reef fringe joined a dark silty seabed of volcanic origin. It was along the edge of the reef that we noticed the wire traps camouflaged with broken coral, the intention being to provide an enticing cave for the territorial fishes the fishermen were seeking.

We descended to the trap, the first of a series of traps placed along this area of reef. Upon closer inspection, we noticed that a large sailfin snapper had beaten itself to death in the cage.

Out of the gloom came the diver. He came like a torpedo, straight down, his finless feet and the overweighted belt propelling him toward the bottom. Bubbles poured from his mask as he inspected the trap. He removed the dead fish and just threw it away. It sank slowly, resting forgotten on the bottom.

I was dismayed. Although the fish was dead, it still would have fed a small family. It appeared to have no value. He lifted the heavy steel trap and literally sprinted across the bottom, his bare feet churning up silt, searching for a new location.

Upon finding a satisfactory area, he placed the trap, and began swimming over to the reef edge. From here, he gathered broken coral, or selectively broke coral to disguise the trap.

My attention was no longer on the environmental issues and wastefulness of this industry. We were at 70 feet (23 metres)! I was watching the diving practices, and my mind started churning through diving physiology. Rapid descent, heavy workload, CO₂.

How many descents had he already made? How rapidly was he going to ascend?

Suddenly, the trap baited, he was gone, moving quickly on to another trap. I checked my AIR X computer, and thought 'these guys must be dying here'.

The diver repeated the process. I was obliged to help. I knew clearly the rate at which nitrogen was dissolving into his blood. And I suspected that a decompression stop was unlikely. My suspicions were confirmed a moment later.

The diver tugged on the hose, gripped it firmly, and was dragged rapidly towards the surface, frog kicking all the way. I began to follow, my computer screamed a rapid ascent alarm.

I stopped, and rejoined Stefanie, who had been concentrating on photo-documenting the scene. We looked at each other and ascended as we had been trained.

During our safety decompression stop below the fishing boat, my mind was racing. What would a hyperbaric medical specialist discover down here with an extensive study? Both of us were aghast to

hear a splash, and see the same diver plummeting downward with a new trap. Moments later he was back, glancing at us as he surged by.

We surfaced in brilliant sunlight. Both crew members were on the boat and our companions looked on from *Longnose* in amazement. The sea was warm and flat.

We hung from the gunwhales of the fisherman's boat and began asking questions. The compressor was shut down. The only sound was the chug of other compressors nearby. We spoke loudly. Obviously, the inability to equalise one's ears was not a barrier to working. I wanted to have a look at those ear drums, or what was left of them.

I felt obliged to attempt to pass on some safe diving practices immediately, and to find out more.

How long had they been working today?
Since first light.

How many times had they dived?
Don't know. We take turns.

How much longer would they work today?
Until we are finished.

I was no longer as interested in the environmental aspects of this industry as I was now certain there was a human cost. Inwardly, I was angry, and ashamed of my species. The picture was becoming all too clear.

Who taught you to dive?
The company provided the boat and told us to keep breathing.

Did they tell you not to dive too much? To go up and down slowly? To stop on the way up?
No, they told us how much money we could make.

How much money can you make?
10,000 rupiah (US\$ 5) a kg for the best fish, if alive.

How many kilos a day do you take?
Don't know. They give us the money.

Are you tired at the end of the day?
Yes, very tired.

Do you feel sick?
Sometimes sleep is difficult. But I feel better the next day.

Has any other taught you about decompression illness? I was greeted with blank looks. I described the symptoms.

I was reluctant to say too much. I knew that these men were feeding their families through this industry. I knew they would continue. I wasn't sure it would help them to be scared of their work. I decided to concentrate on providing ideas on a safer method of laying and retrieving the traps. I wanted to explain staging fish, and piercing swim bladders, so more of the catch would live.

Before I could begin the elder of the two spoke ... I will never forget his words. I am sure that he is not alone in his recollections.

He said very matter-of-factly: 'Sekarang saya menarik, karena kemarin, teman saya, dia tidak bilang apa apa. Dia mati saja'.

A rough translation equates to this:

'Now I am interested because, recently, my friend, he didn't say anything, he just died'.

I was not surprised. I was upset. I wondered how many others had died or been damaged by the greed of an invisible financier. We spoke some more about ascent and descent practices, about the use of ropes and rope signals to raise and lower traps. I was trying, but they wanted to move on to their next set of traps.

We asked if we could follow. They were happy to have us join them. In the next two hours, we were in and out of the water, taking turns trying to keep up with these men. It became clear they didn't know where exactly their traps were. They were using rough triangulation in order to locate reef edges, and hence their traps. They couldn't mark them, because someone would steal their fish, or traps, or both.

I saw one diver do nine ascents and descents to an average depth of 60 feet (20 metres), at a speed varying somewhere between dangerously fast, and the speed of light—all this in 90 minutes. I didn't see him retrieve one live fish in that time. Numerous other boats were repeating the same procedure at other locations around this huge bay. We took photo after photo. We took turns to dive into the murk. We knew these people must be suffering decompression illness. We knew that some of them were dying. We knew that the people providing the equipment and the financial incentive obviously didn't give a damn!

Eventually, we decided we must leave to seek a safe anchorage on the north side of Moyo Island.

This is such a difficult situation. There are so many factors to consider.

This industry undeniably provides an income for the people of the region. It gives them an opportunity to make good money quickly, and provides the foundations of their children's future. It is highly likely they may never live to see the future with their children, however.

In an ideal world, the industry would be outlawed. This is not an ideal world. The fact remains that while a demand exists for live fish, and the profits are so great, people will continue catching them.

Historically, divers have placed themselves at risk due to lack of knowledge. As we approach the millennium, this is no longer necessary. Financiers should have the human decency to educate the divers, allowing them to continue making a living in reasonable safety. From a humanist perspective, if it is to continue, it has to be in a responsible manner.

From an environmental aspect it should be stopped.

Environmentally, this industry cannot continue in its present form. The fish are territorial. Mating populations are being decimated. The yields are on the decrease. Corals traumatised by such rough handling do not rebound well, disrupting the fragile ecosystem of the reef. Ultimately, the environmental damage is being borne by all of us, for the momentary culinary gratification of a few.

The Indonesian government continues to publicly denounce unsustainable fishing practices, but the answer lies in the nations where these fish are ultimately sold. The answer lies with the people who are buying them. The sale of live wild fish could easily be declared illegal. As should the purchase. The penalties should be heavy, because the environmental costs and the human costs are high. I am not offering a solution to the economic problems of isolated island communities. I am all too familiar with the dilemma of subsistence lifestyles. The problem lies not with these people who, some times at a great personal cost, catch these fish. It lies with the people who are financing the industry at great personal gain. The solution lies with the people who demand the fish, and the governments of the nations where the fish are proudly displayed, and sold at great profit, without concern for the real costs.

Source: *Pacific below*