

Why Wakatobi?

by Wade Hughes

“Why do you come back, again?”

Wakatobi management asked that question of Robyn, my wife, and me just a few days ago. It’s a routine enough question, part of their ongoing efforts to inform their marketing and promotion programs. And there are a number of simple one-word answers; logistics; reliability; consistency; flexibility. But there’s more to it than that, and perhaps enough to interest readers of UWP as they weigh their options for a future dive trip. I only discuss the land-based resort as I have not dived the liveboard, Pelagian. I haven’t been paid for this article and have no personal interests in the business of Wakatobi.

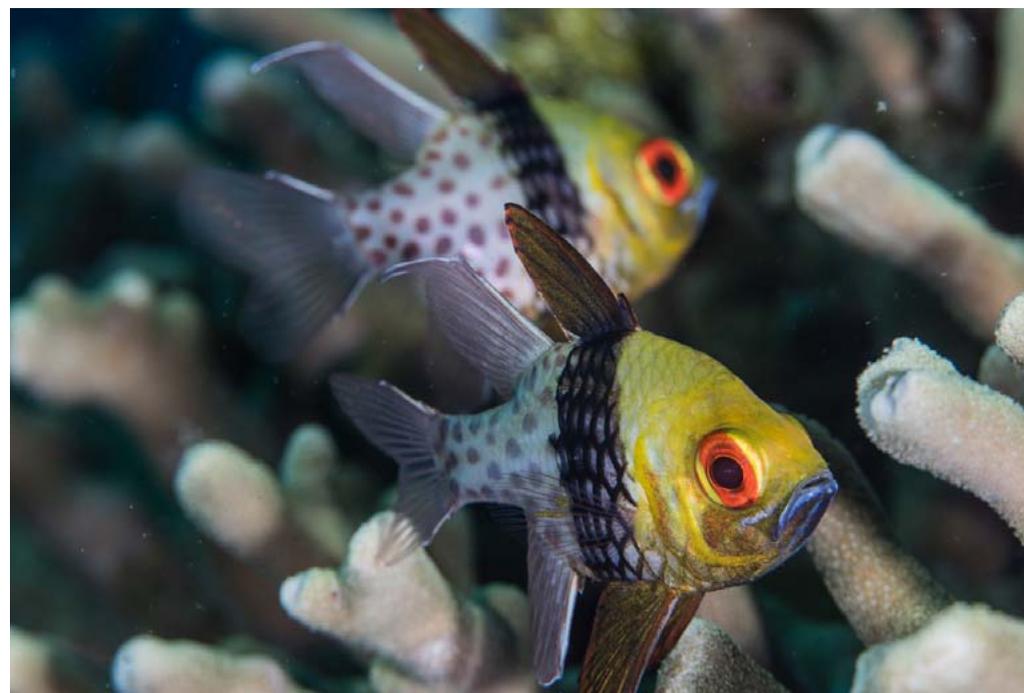
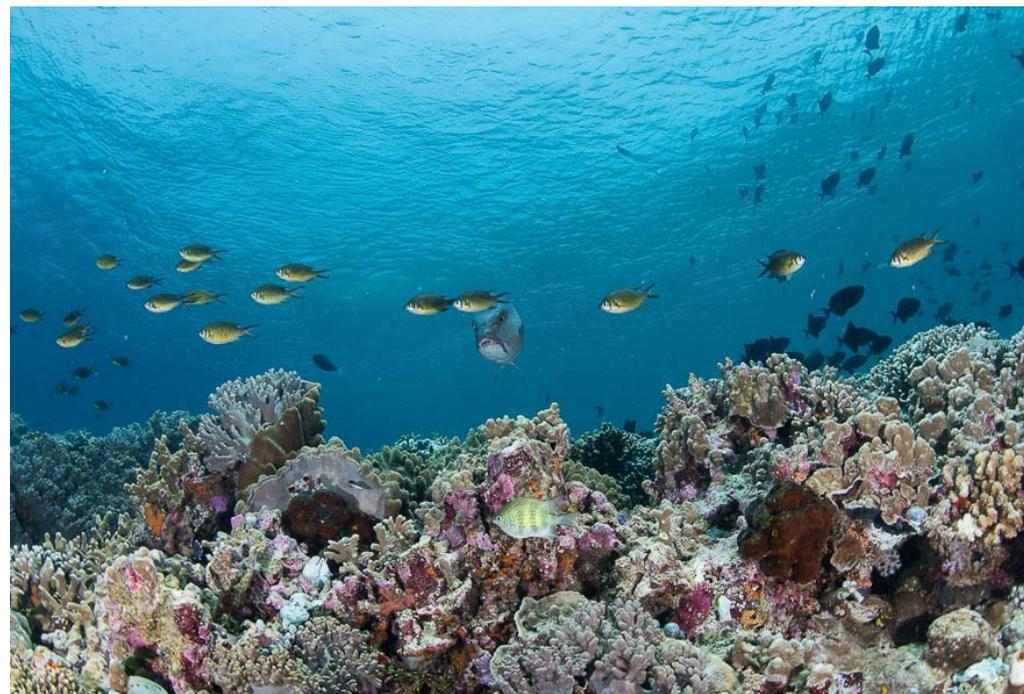
Wakatobi is evolving. When we first visited, almost all the other guests were more or less serious divers, ranging from technical deep-diving rebreathers through professional underwater photographers and film-makers, to keen amateurs, and happy crowds of social divers. On this three-week visit we’ve seen wider range of guests. To the full complement of divers, has been added individuals and families seemingly as intent on relaxing in the sun, as getting out and exploring the reefs.

According to the resort management, this broadening shift in interest has been a noticeable trend for some time and underpins the resort’s offering additional water-based activities such as kite-surfing. Whatever the reasons for the trend, it is feedstock for the maintenance and continuing growth of the resort. But it raises an immediate question: can growth and diversification remain compatible with the isolation and exclusivity that established Wakatobi as a world-class diving destination?

One former Red Sea dive guide, recounting his time in Egypt, told me that, in the early days, “it was necessary to push the fish out of the way to see the reef. Today, you have to push the divers out of the way to see a fish.”

Nauticam 5DMK111 housing, Canon 8-15mm f4L fisheye zoom; Kenko 1.4x teleconverter, Inon Z240 strobes

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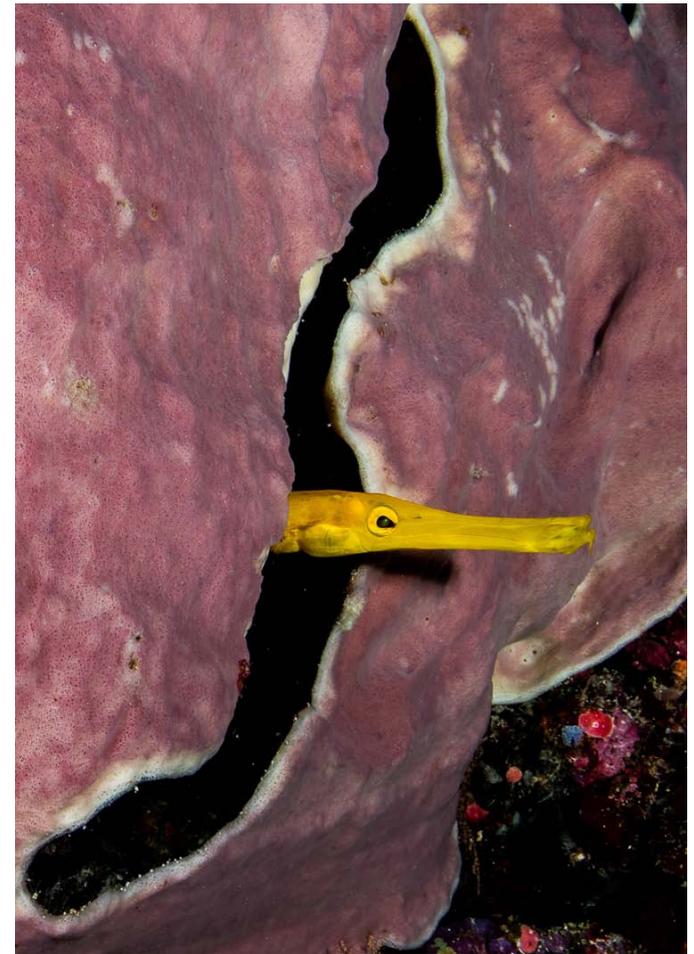
More and more, this is becoming the case with many well known dive destinations. Market forces, rightly, drive this. If more people want to dive, and more of them are either happy to, or want to, dive in groups, want to bring their families, and enjoy a range of water-based activities, then dive resorts need to cater to them, or go under.

But where does that leave the other end of



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the spectrum? Divers who want to plonk along alone, and in quietude. Experience and observe life in the sea at their own pace. Perhaps expend multiple tanks of air at a single dive site, waiting to see and perhaps photograph an unusual species or behaviour? Unless such divers have the means and logistics to mount their own expeditions into the unknown, or can work from a home-base close



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to their areas of interest, there is only one other alternative; established dive centres. Wakatobi does cater for this, perhaps dwindling, category of diver. Private guides are available as an option. They are outstanding at finding marine life. They are knowledgeable, and without exception, always extremely helpful. These guides will still take you out on the boats with the larger groups, but you'll



(Above & right) Nauticam 5DMK111 housing, Canon 5DSR; Canon 100mm f2.8L Macro IS; Nauticam; SMC wet diopter, Inon Z240 strobes

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drop onto the reefs at different times and places and you'll enjoy most of the dives in peace.

One too-frequent exception to this is the night-diving. Even with a private guide many of the night dive sites become crowded. Most of the sites are in protected bays and lagoons—excellent sites for night diving by most measures. But, after five or six pairs of divers have toured the

attractions, the sand is stirred up, and the prevalence of scything white light beams spooks the marine life, and distracts from the overall experience of being in the sea at night.

But, if you really want to avoid all this, and dive to your own agenda, as an additional option, Wakatobi offers the use of a private boat. Complete with private guide, dedicated crew, and during the day,





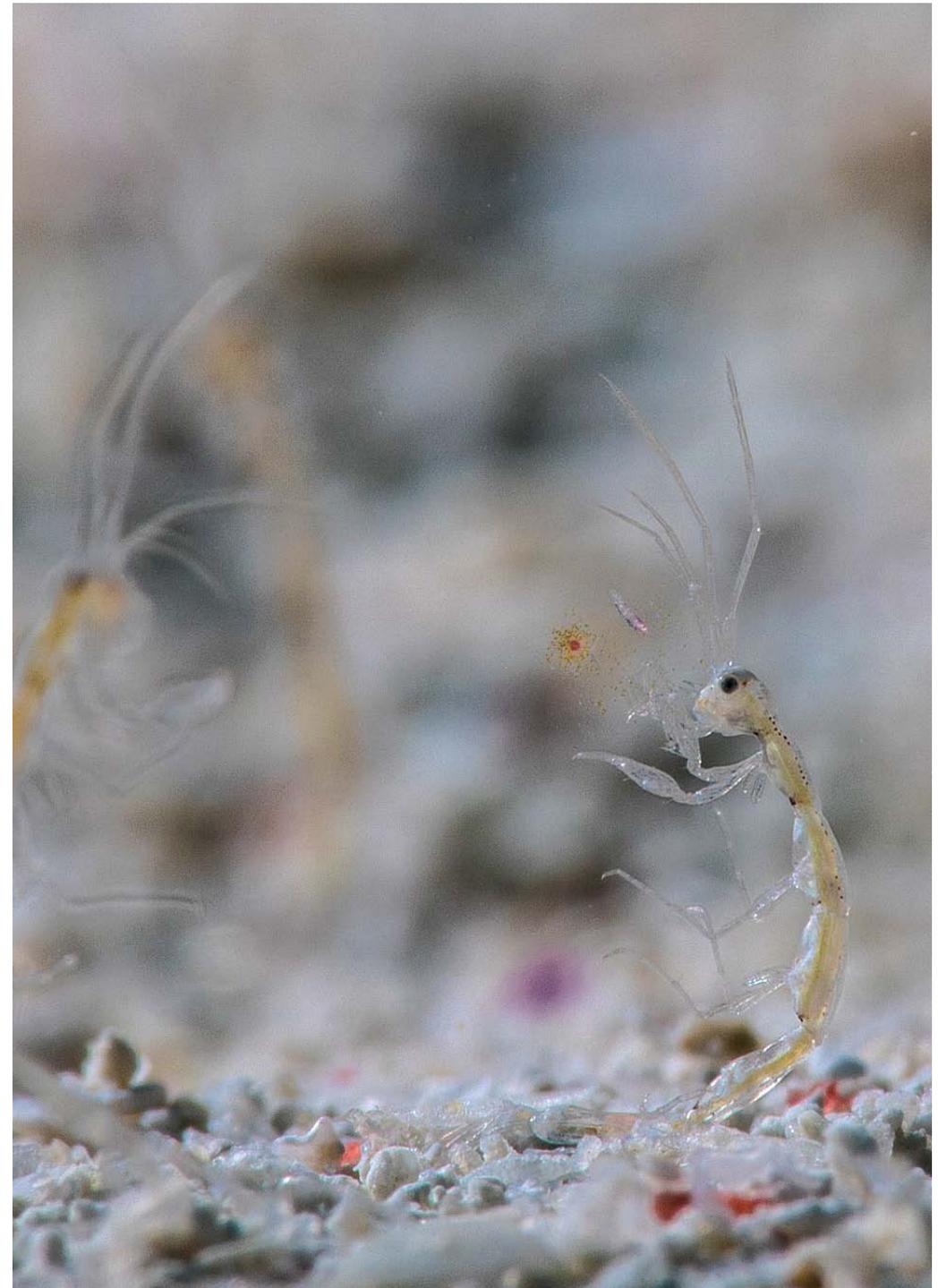
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even a personal waiter. On one hand this is pampering, but on the other, it is an effective way to provide uninterrupted time on the reef.

A final word about those reefs. These are not “pristine” as is commonly claimed. I doubt there are now many, if any, coral reefs in the world that are in their original condition, unaffected by human activity. These are reefs that have been fished and exploited for

centuries. Neither are they complete eco-systems. Sharks, for example, are rarely seen, thanks to the ongoing mindless demand for shark fins in some parts of the world. But they are very well managed reefs in good and, thanks to Wakatobi’s conservation program, improving health. The resort’s own website frankly summarises the delicate balance that must be attained in order to sustain these reefs.



“Prior to the program, the locals were largely dependant (sic) on working with foreign, illegal fishing boats to make a living. In the area around Wakatobi, this kind of fishing still occurs (limited however by our patrols) by boats from other areas of Indonesia or other countries. These boats are owned and crewed by people who don’t consider the pressure they are putting on the marine-life. The owners don’t pay local taxes, the crew doesn’t care where they throw anchor or deplete marine resources. In the end, locals get very little gain from this kind of activity.

But there is no way that anyone with a sustainability agenda could have marched in and simply told the locals to not walk on the reefs and stop supporting the foreign fishermen, as these activities provided part of their living. Instead, what was needed was an alternative source of income whereby people could choose whether they wished to preserve or destroy. We believed, and still do, that the best and most sustainable alternative is to create employment and education opportunities through responsible, conservation-linked tourism”.

The main reason we have, and will again return to Wakatobi, can be found in these two paragraphs. The ease of getting here on the resort’s chartered plane is great. The quality of the friendly staff is world-class. The diving is consistently good.

But, in a world where the lottery of birth means that some people have to scavenge the reef-tops at low tide for food, while others cruise past on holiday, with camera systems worth more than a local house, it is additionally satisfying to be supporting a sustainable conservation program such as Wakatobi’s. Individually, it might only be a drop in the ocean, but each guest coming here to explore the reefs or just to relax, is part of that program.



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The incoming revenues are creating opportunity and choice for the locals. The locals are protecting the reefs. The reefs are attracting the revenues. Drop by drop, it is making a difference.

Wade Hughes

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and a Member of the Explorers Club.
Photo Robyn Hughes*

