

UNDER THE SURFACE  
A lot of work has taken place between the dive resort and the community to protect these reefs.

# Funding paradise

A remote stretch of Indonesian shore was at risk of plunder until a dive pioneer partnered with villagers to create incentives to protect it.

Story by **Karen Stearns**, Wakatobi Dive Resort



The most-effective marine-conservation programmes don't rely on top-down enforcement that attempts to deter destructive practices through regulation. Instead, they are bottom-up efforts that inspire communities to engage in positive behaviours, grass-roots initiatives that coastal populations willingly embrace. Wakatobi Resort is proof of this principle, and has earned broad recognition for its innovative partnership-based conservation programme.

The genesis of this programme was in the mid-1990s, when Lorenz Mäder was first laying the groundwork for the property that would eventually become Wakatobi Resort. Mäder had spent several years searching for the ideal location for a dive lodge before discovering a small island in a remote part of central Indonesia. The setting on Pulau Onemobaa was stunning, with a white sand beach and surrounding reefs that were pristine and covered in a spectacular menagerie of marine life.

At that time, destructive new fishing practices such as netting and dynamite fishing were spreading through the Indian Ocean, laying waste to coral reefs. To safeguard the future of the reefs in his area, Mäder met with local fishermen and village elders from the surrounding communities. He offered a unique proposal. In exchange for agreeing to honour a "no take" zone on six kilometres of reef, the residents of 17 villages would receive direct-lease payments from Wakatobi.

They struck a deal, and the Collaborative Reef Conservation Program was created. It arranged for the placement

of mooring buoys on all dive sites, to prevent anchor damage. The initiative funded additional moorings in local harbours to protect more of the seabed. And there were additional benefits to the community.

Wakatobi Resort provides clean water and electricity to the nearby village of Lamanggau, where many of its staff members live, on the opposite side of Onemobaa from the resort. Opposite that village, on neighbouring Tomia Island, the resort built an airstrip. Wakatobi has also helped orchestrate the installation of solar-power plants to generate power locally for both Onemobaa and Tomia, which now meet their own daytime needs. Lamanggau Village even sells any excess electricity into the public utility's system, both islands drawing on the power grid at night. Wakatobi is working to connect the resort itself to Tomia's system.

Wakatobi also organizes community-awareness seminars, purchases and distributes educational supplies to local schools, and employs more than 100 local workers. The resort's very name comes from its surrounding communities, combining the four islands of the surrounding regency: Wangi-Wangi (WA), Kaledupa (KA), Tomia (TO) and Binongko (BI).

By putting a monetary value on healthy reefs and sustainable eco-tourism, Wakatobi's programmes began to change local attitudes towards conservation. Additional support came from the fishermen, who realized that the no-take zones were serving to replenish fish populations by serving as safe



This page: A dive boat positioned above the dive site Zoo, named for the myriad fish at this site. (opposite).



PHOTO: DIDILLOTZE



PHOTO: WADE AND ROBYN HUGHES

PHOTOS: WALT STEARNS (OPENING SPREAD), MATHIS WEATHERALL (LEFT)

breeding grounds. This in turn boosted sustainable harvests in waters outside the reserve. The Collaborative Reef Conservation Program eventually grew to encompass some 20km of reef. The same fishermen who were initially skeptical of the programme are now some of its most vigilant enforcers.

In addition to protecting the reefs, Wakatobi leads the community by example by implementing sustainable practices and stewarding healthy environmental management. The resort has established its own recycling station, and works to reduce the use of disposable plastic items in all phases of resort operations. For instance, the resort provides guests with reusable aluminium water containers to eliminate the use of disposable plastic water bottles.

To combat the problem of plastic waste carried by ocean currents, the staff engages in a number of ongoing debris-removal efforts. Four times a day, the staff clean more than more than 1 km of surrounding beaches, removing plastics and any other debris that has washed ashore. On a daily basis, the dive teams remove any trash and debris that they collect on the reef. Team members who are working from the dive centre, or operating taxi boats, or otherwise assisting snorkellers and divers make similar efforts to keep the shallow reef tops clean.

Wakatobi's commitment to environmental protections go far beyond the resort boundaries. The resort sponsors weekly village cleanups that involve up to 100 local people, and works closely with local communities and governments on the issues of waste management. Wakatobi provides waste bins, organizes waste-collection vehicles, and sponsors additional waste storage

and removal for the adjacent island of Tomia. To enhance local environmental awareness, and promote sustainable practices, the resort pays a team of 20 well-respected community leaders and influential individuals. These spokespeople use their social status within the community to increase public awareness on issues of reef conservation and waste management on Tomia.

Mäder also remains personally committed to the issues of waste management and water quality. He has worked behind the scenes with officials, who respect the initiative he took to launch the Collaborative Reef Conservation Program. That opened doors for him to suggest other avenues to enhance environmental protections and boost sustainable tourism. Were it not for official support, many initiatives would founder.

"In my voluntary function as an eco-tourism consultant, I've had countless discussions with ministers, governors and other high-ranking politicians and policymakers," Mäder says. "I always urge them to improve nationwide waste management on land, as well as on boats."

Coastal communities around the world are rapidly having to come to terms with the urgent need for more-responsible waste-management practices. There's also the equally important need for the control and removal of debris already polluting our oceans. Community-based programmes such as those initiated by Wakatobi Resort stand out as working, self-sustaining solutions to the issues.

Find out more about Wakatobi Resort and its efforts at [www.wakatobi.com](http://www.wakatobi.com) or contact [office@wakatobi.com](mailto:office@wakatobi.com). **AD**