Keeping change at bay

As the world’s marine ecosystems face unprecedented pressures, marine parks are playing an increasingly important role in nurturing the relationship between tourism and sustainability. In one corner of Indonesia, business and community have combined to set up a future that promises to be as bountiful as the area’s past.

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The biodiversity encountered by Charles Darwin on a collection of weather-beaten rocks off the coast of Central America in the 19th century enabled him to return home with his theory of natural selection. His book ‘On the Origin of Species’ would dominate the natural academic landscape for more than 100 years. What many people do not realise is that Darwin’s rise to become the toast of Victorian Britain was not so much down to the singular brilliance of his theory, but the speed with which he sailed it home. On the other side of the Pacific was another naturalist who had penned his own theory of natural selection, inspired by the bountiful waters and forests of Indonesia. The impossibly beautiful array of flora and fauna encountered by Alfred Wallace during his expedition proved to be both his inspiration and downfall – he tarried too long in the archipelago, allowing Darwin to return to London, and to his publishers, before him.

Happily for Wallace, he did still leave his mark. In 1859, the same year that Darwin’s bestseller was first published, the Wallace Line was first drawn. This faunal boundary line indicates the change in ecozones between Asia and Wallacea (also named after Wallace), which is itself a transitional faunal zone between Asia and Australia. The discovery and acknowledgement of these lines and zones was – and still is – a clear indicator of the scale of biodiversity found in that particular corner of the world. It is one of the most bountiful places on Earth.

Experiencing that biodiversity as a modern-day traveller can be something of a conundrum. Life abounds in these places due to a balance that has evolved over millennia. Our presence, if not controlled, can be damaging, and because we live in a time when our world’s wild places have never been more accessible, both physically and financially, it has never been more important to interact with nature’s most beautiful spaces in a conscientious way. The world is, after all, a very different place now than when Wallace were alive. Happily there are places that have found the balance. Places where natural beauty abounds, respectful tourism works and local communities thrive.

Fringed by the Banda and Flores seas, southeast of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi in the Tukang Besi archipelago, Wakatobi National Park, is a 1.4 million-hectare protected area that allows 21st-century travellers to experience the biodiversity that so enthralled Wallace almost two centuries ago. Named after the largest islands in the park – Wangiwangi, Kaledupa, Tomea and Binongko – the Wakatobi is a protected gem in the Coral Triangle, one that offers visitors the opportunity to revel in the area’s flora and fauna, before leaving without having impacted upon it. The park’s coral reefs and atolls host one of our planet’s most biodiverse marine ecosystems with more than 3,000 fish species and 750...
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coral species. These creatures make their homes in a topographically varied underwater world that consists of sea mounts, miles of precipitous walls and jutting reef platforms. As a keen traveller, journalist and professional underwater photographer, the allure of life below the park’s waterline still has not dimmed after nearly 500 dives here. 

Personally, it’s the continuing reveal of marine biodiversity that appeals to me as a photographer, but the park attracts adventurers and divers of many stripes. Founder of Wakatobi Dive Resort Lorenz Mäder is an expert rebreather diver who has explored the deep canyons that splinter the park’s undulating seabed and sheer walls. Others visit for the current-induced drift dives along the walls, kaleidoscopic reefs on view, the abyss below. Nature’s capacity to build intricate ecosystems of vast branching stony corals, rocky caverns with collations of human-sized tube sponges, is ever-present. Reefs are interspersed with pastel streams of soft corals. Habitats teem with fish ranging from sparring clouds of resident anthias and damsels to brazen pelagic species passing through. 

The internecine wars, territorial rivalities and general Shakespearean comedies that play out on the walls and reef platforms provide endless entertainment – Wallace’s natural selection still in full flow. 

On my most recent visit, I was fortunate to witness a coral spawning event at dusk - the release of millions of minuscule gametes, each hoping to beat the intimidating odds of successful reproduction. As the spawn hung in the water – a mist over the undulating reef - I witnessed the reef come to life in a way few people witness as opportunistic fishes dashed about making the most of an easy meal. Within 15 minutes it was all over. The spawn had dissipated and the reef returned to normal as the sun set and the water turned clear and black.

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When Mäder founded his dive resort he also created the Collaborative Reef Conservation Program in conjunction with local leaders and village elders. This economic and environmental initiative was designed to motivate those living in the Wakatobi region to take an active role in protecting their shared marine environment. The original 6km of reef originally established as a pilot no-take fishing zone in 1997 has been extended to more than 20km of reef today. The Wakatobi Marine Reserve was later established, before the area’s pioneering conservation work and privately sponsored marine sanctuaries were officially recognised in 2012 when the Wakatobi Marine Park was designated as a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve – something Wallace himself would have surely approved of.

The success of the region – that balance of adventure tourism and sustainability – has been possible as a result of the very direct relationship between economics and a healthy environment. Twenty local villages receive a monthly ‘reef lease’ payment, which incentivises self-management and protection of the National Marine Park’s reefs, which in turn keeps the divers coming back. The reef leases have also worked in earning the broad trust of the village elders and island leaders.

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