

ScubaGlobe

ASIA PACIFIC

Vol.1 No.3

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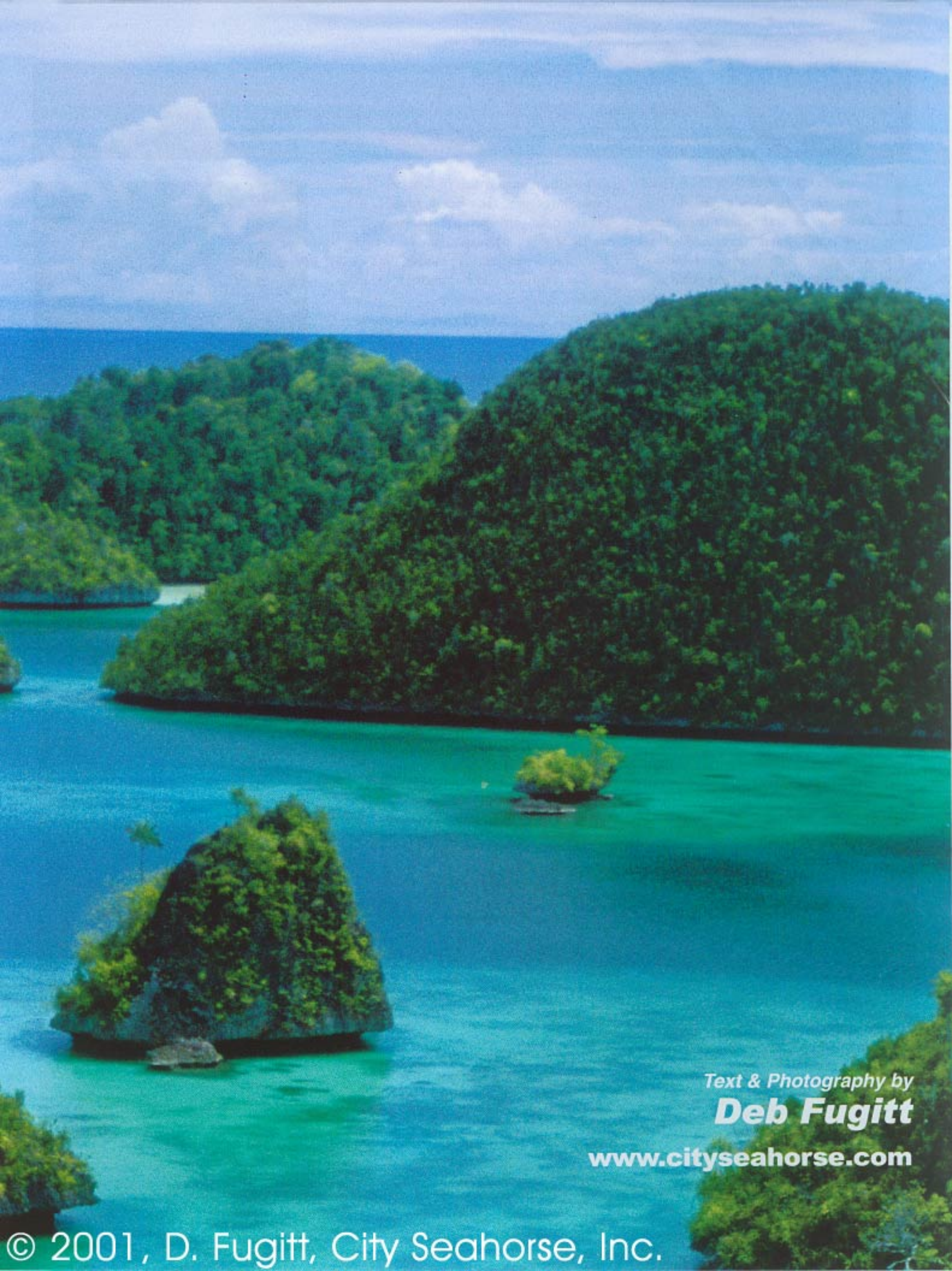
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Raja Ampat

Irian Jaya's Ace in the Hole





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'Raja Ampat'. Do a 'Google' search and you will find a handful of references to diving in the Raja Ampat islands. Travel agent sites quote National Geographic articles and conservation organization surveys, liveboards announce schedules to dive the area for a few weeks, but few dive travel agents have even been to this area, which sees less than 350 tourists per year and even fewer divers.

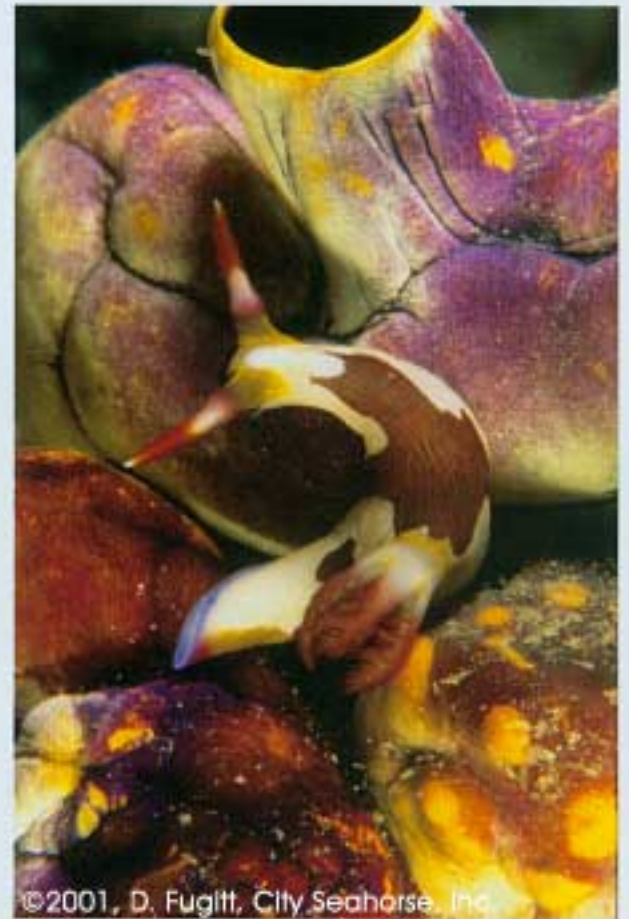
Located off the Northwest 'Birds Head' Peninsula of New Guinea Island, Raja Ampat is an archipelago comprising over 1500 small islands, cays and shoals surrounding the four islands of Misool, Salawati, Batanta and Waigeo and called after the 'Four Kings'. Raja Ampat is a part of the newly named West Papua province of Indonesia which was formerly Irian Jaya. 'Remote' depends on your definition. While much of the area is unexplored, it is easy enough to fly by jet into the local airport from Manado or Ujung Pandang, where you are collected by boat to travel an hour or so to the diving. It is not as remote as say, Sipadan or Wakatobi once were.

Reefs and rainforests

All in one glance, sometimes all in one underwater photo. Soft corals in profusion, in every colour imaginable but often hidden from sight by dense schools of pale

surgeonfish, unicornfish or snappers. Huge pink gorgonian fans being munched by gigantic bumphead parrotfish. Tiny nudibranchs, pygmy seahorses ... too common, double-ended pipefish, crab-eyed gobies. Pods of orcas, hundreds of pilot whales, dolphins, manta and mobula rays. And that is just the first week!

For example, on one of our first dives at Cape Kri, we rolled off the boat into a high rise structure of schools of fish. Descending in clear calm water, I was eye to eye with silvery jacks and then chevron barracuda. Looking down the steep, coral-encrusted slope toward the distant sandy bottom, I saw layers of surgeonfish, snappers, fusiliers and unicornfish. The impression was of a tower with different fish species on each level. Some schools were going north, some going south, I didn't need to move, just hover and try to keep the regulator from dropping out of my mouth. Mind-boggling.



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One of my favourite sites is Sardine Reef. Some weeks I could dive it 5 times every day, in fact I have! In 1999, the first time we dived Sardine, we were dropped into the cape of the reef in a stiff current. Plunging headfirst toward the bottom, we scattered immense schools of bannerfish, fusiliers, blue tail surgeonfish and pale surgeonfish. Once on the bottom, we tucked behind coral heads covered with sturdy soft corals in shades of red, purple and pink.

We missed the cape, so we were in for ride. Rather than drift the length of the reef too quickly, we let the current carry us along and then we would fly down behind a coral when we saw something we wanted to photograph. The fishes had the same idea. Batfish, sweetlips, surgeonfish and many other species were also ducking behind corals and fans.

Strong currents are very common on reefs throughout Raja Ampat. When we dive Sardine at just the right time, with the currents coming straight onto the cape of this reef, the diving is effortless with schools of fish hanging in mid-water and the corals pumped and feeding. It is at these times that we can lose sight of a dive buddy when a school of fish comes between us. I am not sure how



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Sardine Reef got its name, but perhaps it is due to these tightly packed schools of fish.

The tassled wobbegong shark is common here. These sharks love to lie quietly beneath a low overhang and although they are somewhat camouflaged, they are easily spotted by the diver who knows where to look. Occasionally, one will go gliding past and settle atop a large table coral where it remains calm at the approach of divers and becomes a perfect model for photographers.

Confetti

The area is dotted with tiny islands scattered like confetti across an area of sea and surrounded by large platform and fringing reef systems. The seas here are calm for much of the year due to light winds and the shelter provided by nearby islands and reefs.

Everywhere one looks, potential dive sites beg to be explored and with a water temperature always in the 27-28 degrees C range, we would be happy to spend many hours per day doing so. Areas of mushroom shaped rock islands seem to harbour some of the better dive sites and make for beautiful and interesting topside scenery as well. The turquoise lagoons, mushroom and beehive islands of Wayag, although visited by very



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few people, are already becoming known from the incredible photos from the area that many say is more beautiful than the rock islands of Palau. This area is destined to become a World Heritage Site.


Most reefs in the area are pristine and the diversity of fish life is apparent, even to those of us who are not scientists. We realised this within our first few days of diving back in the dark ages, before the scientists and surveys

declared this the new hot spot and possible centre of biodiversity in the world. Yes, another claim of 'centre'. This one backed up by preliminary surveys.

Some of these special rock island dives in the Waigeo-Fam area are Melissa's Garden, Mike's Point and Five Rocks. All are fabulous dives, each with its own characteristics.

At Melissa's, tiny islands sit upon a shallow plateau. The stems of these islands are covered in soft corals, fans and tunicates. Vertical schools of fish often drape the islands' sides or swirl across the hard coral covered plateau.

Examine the tunicate laden sides of the three islands for nudibranchs, flatworms, blennies and scorpionfish and watch for sea snakes slithering up the sides, on the way to an opening in the top of the overhang to get a breath of air. We've seen blue-ring octopi at many sites. They are very small and usually noticed only when they move. Melissa's is the only site where I've noticed a particularly stunning crinoid in abundance that is dark red on one side of its arms and yellow on the other.



November
2004

Raja Ampat

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Kaboi Bay

Five Rocks sits at the mouth of Kaboi Bay. Unusual corals and fans on the slope are normally covered in silt, however on one occasion they were so thickly covered with the tiny silver fish (a delicacy from Kaboi Bay in Indonesian markets), we thought immediately of snowdrifts.

The five rocks appear as one cracked mushroom island. Dive underneath to see they are separated, with red soft coral and reef fish in between. Things to look for here are unusual nudibranchs, flatworms, cowrie shells, crocodile fish and crinoid inhabitants. Watch also for mobula rays and mantas. Schools of barracuda and fusiliers seem to frequent the area just before dusk, when we've also found many fish feeding near the surface.

On our first trip to Raja Ampat we stayed on a tiny island named Wai. As we approached the island I thought 'this is the ultimate paradise I've seen advertised in all those bridal magazines'. This tiny flat island, surrounded by a perfect white sand beach and azure lagoon comes alight at night with fireflies attracted to the feathery casarina trees.

I saw my first 'undiscovered' Raja creature just off the beach in the shallow coral rubble and seagrass at Wai on my first night dive there. The Raja epaulette shark, *Hemiscyllium freycineti*, is an adorable little bamboo shark, about the size of a small woman's arm. I often think of this shark when a non-diver asks me, "Aren't you afraid of sharks?"

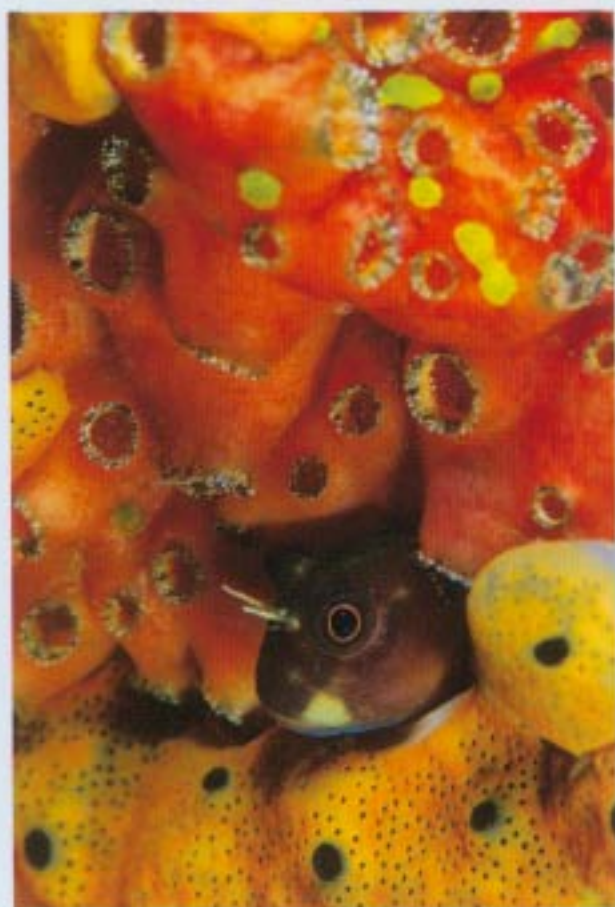
Just outside the lagoon, two P47 aircraft, remnants of a WWII ditching, are still intact

with the wings and propeller still attached to the fuselage. These are now heavily encrusted with corals and sponges and although I've not seen them here, pygmy seahorses are reputed to live on a fan beneath one wing.

Although I've not caught the craze, I know that wild, untethered pygmy seahorses roam the seafan ranges of Raja Ampat. The newly discovered but relatively widespread *Hippocampus denise*, the yellow *Hippocampus bargibantia* and the well-known pink variety are found throughout the region. I've asked the divemaster to carry my wide angle rig while I quickly shoot a roll of 'pygs' with my macro setup and then return to my wide angle to pursue more challenging subject material.

There are anemones and anemone fish, clown triggerfish, lionfish and all the usual macro suspects if you can tear your eyes away from the larger picture.

No article on Raja Ampat diving can be complete without a mention of the narrow passage between Gam and Waigeo Islands. A channel, so narrow it seems to be a small river, divides the two islands and runs into Kaboi Bay, a bay which at first seems to be a large lake. On both sides of the channel dense rainforest overhangs the water. The channel is shallow and at times has a ferocious current with mini whirlpools in the larger bays. My best dives here start at the open end of the channel in shallow water during a period when



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the current is running toward Kaboi Bay and before it gets too strong.

Along the channel I pass areas of golden cup, red and pink soft corals that line the channel's sides. Then I tuck inside a shallow bay for a relaxing look around. There in the calm water, pinnacles covered with tunicates host many flatworms and nudibranchs. Soft corals and fans grow on drowned logs, while the sun paints the dark water with streaks of light. Inside these mysterious bays where the water's surface is very calm I look up past brilliantly coloured sea fans to see rainforest where archerfish seem to fly through the green leafy branches of trees. In some places, corals are only inches from leaves. We've joked that the only thing missing to complete the perfect reef and rainforest photo would be a Wilson's red bird of paradise perched on a branch just above the water. This bird lives nearby so it is not a completely unreasonable hope.

New discoveries

The delights of Raja Ampat are numerous with already too many to describe and new sites discovered every month.

Now that everyone is placing Raja Ampat on their websites and new resorts and liveaboards are coming to the area, its time to put Raja Ampat on your schedule.

Deb Fugitt spent 18 weeks photographing the wonders of Raja Ampat since 1999 combined with working on website and escorting small groups to the area. For more of Deb's photos, visit www.cityseahorse.com/gallery/rajaampat

So as not to be outdone by those travel agent websites, I quote from the first Conservation International Rapid Assessment Bulletin:

The total biomass estimate for sites in the Raja Ampat Islands was considerably greater than that for other previously sampled areas in the "coral triangle" including Milne bay Province (Papua New Guinea), Togean-Banggai Islands (Indonesia), and Calamianes Island (Philippines).

Reef fish: A total of 828 species were recorded, raising the total known from the islands to 970 species. Several notable results were achieved for fishes including the two highest counts (283 and 281 species) ever recorded by G. Allen during a single dive anywhere in the world. These totals were achieved at Cape Kri and at the Southern Fam Group. A total of 200 or more species per site is considered the benchmark for an excellent fish count. These figures were achieved at 51% of Raja Ampat Sites, surpassing the previous high of 42% of sites at Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea.

Corals: The islands have the highest known diversity of reef corals for an area of its size. A total of 456 species plus up to nine potential new species or unusual growth forms were recorded. A remarkable 96% of all Scleractinia recorded from



Indonesia are likely to occur in the Raja Ampat Islands.

Molluscs: Mollusc diversity was higher than for any previous RAP expedition and similar surveys conducted by the Western Australian Museum in Australia. A total of 699 species were recorded during the survey...

Read the entire short version of this report at: www.conservation.or.id/papua/News/Page3/Report_Raja_4.pdf

Waypoints

Raja Ampat

Nearest International Airport
Jakarta

Dry Season
March - Nov and Jul - Sept.

Electricity
Generator, 220/240V

Local Currency
Indonesian Rupiah

Country Dialling Code
+62



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