

ENVIRONMENT

Text by Shawn Heinrichs | Images by Justin Ebert



Aftermath: Fins from juvenile reef sharks drying in the sun

SHARK FIN FRONTIER

Located off the western tip of West Papua, Raja Ampat is perhaps the most remote and pristine area in the Indonesian archipelago. It covers an area of roughly 7,000 square kilometres and is loaded with forested limestone islands, mangrove-ringed lagoons and flourishing reefs. Raja Ampat is believed by some to have the richest marine biodiversity on the planet.

Andy Miners, a veteran divemaster in the region since 1999, was so taken by the pristine condition of Raja Ampat's reefs that he made it his personal mission to preserve them. He negotiated a long-term lease on Batbitim Island to construct Misool Eco Resort/ Conservation Centre and secured an area of 200 square

kilometres surrounding the island as a "No Take Zone" — a protected area.

After 70 hours of travel to our camp on Batbitim Island in southern Raja Ampat, we wasted no time and began exploring the legendary reefs. I was immediately awestruck by the diversity of fish life and intensity of the reef colours. The amount of marine life was staggering, rivalling that of the world's great dive destinations.

It wasn't until later in the week that we realised we hadn't seen sharks on any of our dives. For such a rich and healthy marine environment, it didn't seem right.

On our last day of diving, we came face-to-face with a predator that explained



Raja Ampat is believed by some to have the richest marine biodiversity on the planet. The numbers are staggering, with approximately 1,000 species of reef fish, 565 species of hard corals, and 700 species of molluscs.

Big pelagics are also prolific in these waters. Massive schools of hunting tuna, pods of dolphins, turtles and other game fish are plentiful.

In addition, encounters with mantas, mobulas and even whale sharks are common. As an added bonus, WWII wrecks are scattered throughout the area.

It's not surprising that Raja Ampat has been nominated to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

RAJA AMPAT



Fisherman returning from netting reef fish as bait to catch more sharks

SEE SHAWN'S VIDEO FOOTAGE AT:
www.bluespheremedia.com/shark-conservation.html

the absence of sharks. Returning from our morning dives, we noticed a boat anchored in the mouth of a lagoon. We figured it was a local fisherman fishing for dinner. Curious, we drew closer and made a grizzly discovery.

On the deck were dozens of shark fins from small reef sharks, recently severed and now drying in the sun. Below the surface, shark carcasses were strewn across the reef.

It's difficult to describe my thoughts at that moment. Bloodstained fins, mutilated sharks, overpowering stench and an unconcerned fisherman — all in this "paradise" lagoon. Everything about the situation was wrong, and the feeling of powerlessness was overwhelming.

Andy immediately took control. Boarding the boat, he requested to see the man's fishing permit. His decisive action snapped me out of my paralysis. I knew what I had to do. I lifted my camcorder and filmed everything I could, so that others could see what I was witnessing. I then loaded my camcorder

into the underwater housing and threw on my snorkel gear. What lay below on the reef was even more devastating.

I focused on the first of the finned sharks. Its eyes still had a flicker of life, and its wounds were fresh. I imagined the exhausted shark being violently hauled onto the boat deck, and while it struggled in vain, its fins and tail sliced off. Bleeding profusely and without fins, it was dumped back into the water, and sunk helplessly to the bottom. Deprived of water flowing over its gills, starved of precious oxygen, it suffocated to death.

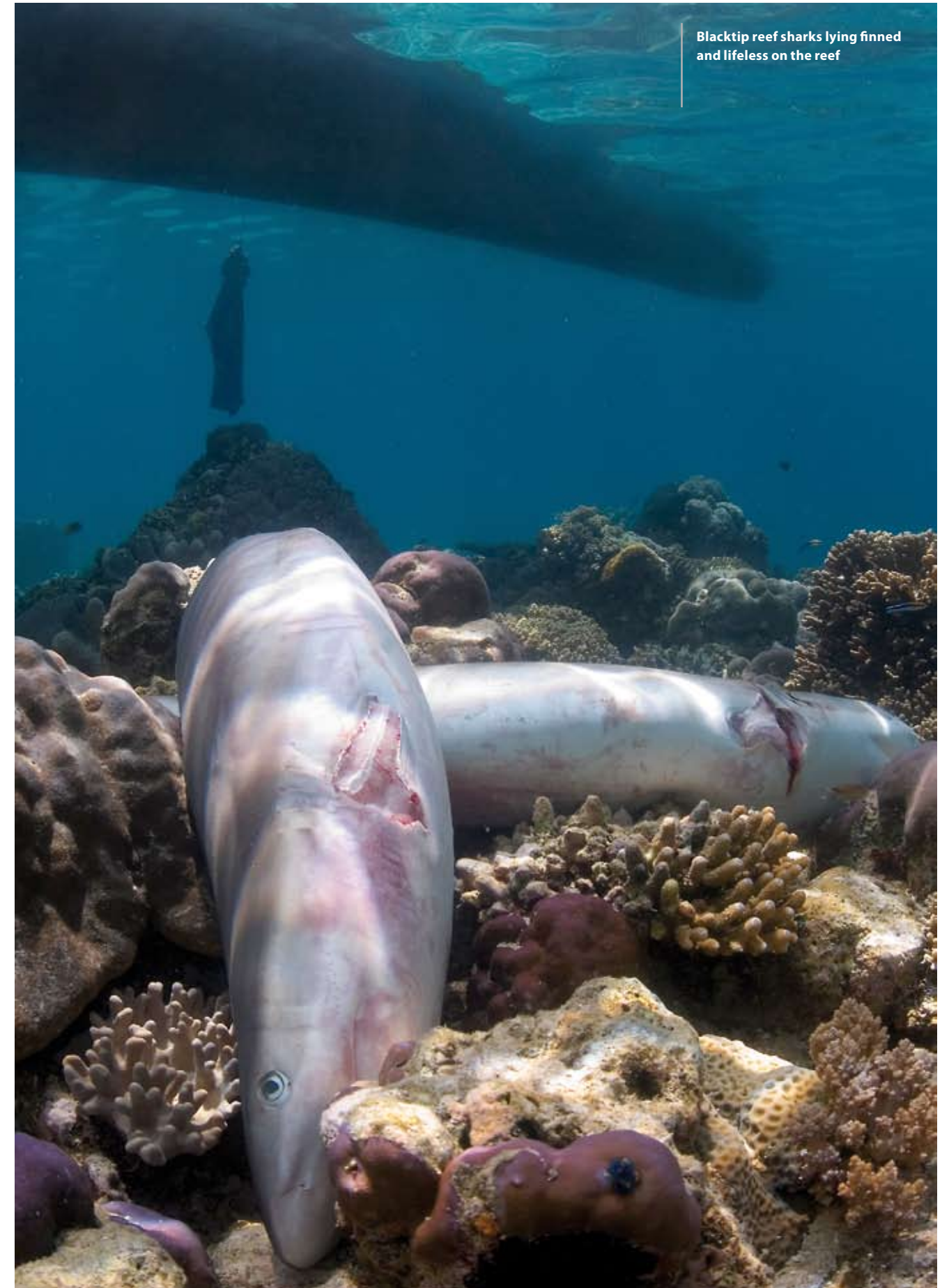
I started the camera rolling again. People had to see what was going on. I counted almost a dozen blacktip reef sharks, all juveniles. My filming was finally broken by the sound of our speedboat approaching. I surfaced. It was time to go.

As we motored out of the lagoon, Andy explained that the fisherman had produced a handwritten permit that was apparently signed by the head of the local villages. Andy would address this when we got back to the island.

The permit cost the equivalent of US\$30 for 30 days of shark fishing. If they caught 300 sharks in 30 days, it worked out to ten cents a shark. A bowl of shark fin soup can sell for up to US\$150.

In a somber mood, we spotted the opening of another large mangrove sanctuary and went in for a look. It was breathtaking. Turquoise waters met dense mangroves, rising to deep green rainforest and radiant blue skies. A magnificent osprey soared from the treetops while a school of large parrotfish darted below. We soaked it all in; there was so much beauty, so precious that preservation work is urgent.

A sudden movement below the surface caught our attention. A blacktip shark glided past our boat in the shallows, moving with deliberation, making its way to the mouth of the sanctuary. With bated breath we followed its movements until its silhouette melted into reflections of mangroves on the water.



Blacktip reef sharks lying finned and lifeless on the reef



Scott Tuason
Underwater Photographer

SAY NO TO SHARK FIN

THE NEXT TIME YOU GO OUT TO
DINNER SAY NO TO SHARKS FIN
AND LET OTHERS KNOW WHY!



All employees and shareholders of fiNS have chosen — we abstain from consuming sharkfin.

MORE ON SHARK FINNING



Scientists estimate that between 50 and 100 million sharks and rays are killed worldwide each year.

Many shark populations have declined by 90 percent, with some species facing imminent extinction. Most of this decline has occurred in the last 20 years.

Shark fin soup is the leading driver of shark finning. "When the buying stops, the killing can too." is the motto of WildAid, a conservation organisation leading the charge to raise awareness about shark finning.

What can you do?

- Don't consume shark fin products
- Avoid companies that deal in shark fin products
- Educate your friends and encourage them to take action
- Join organisations that are working to end shark finning

EPILOGUE

Shortly after this encounter, Andy paid a visit to the *Kapala Desa* (village head) whose support was critical to ending shark finning in Misool. By apprehending the shark fisherman and sending him back to the village, we were sending a clear message that this wasn't just a "paper park". After some lively discussion, the *Kapala Desa* reiterated his support of the No Take

Zone (NTZ) and reaffirmed that no more shark fishing permits would be issued. He stated further that we were within our rights to enforce this rule, and he suggested that we start a patrol to ensure the integrity of the NTZ. Getting rangers to patrol the NTZ will be one of the first projects for our conservation centre, and we are currently raising the funds for this project. ○

Andy Miners informing fisherman that he is in a protected area



THE AUTHORS

SHAWN HEINRICHS is a videographer and filmmaker who specialises in underwater video and adventure travel. He is committed to marine conservation, taking on roles such as being a conservation moderator for Wetpixel.com. His passion and work take him to the corners of the planet in pursuit of wild encounters with the ocean's most impressive creatures.

www.BlueSphereMedia.com

JUSTIN EBERT currently lives in Singapore and Boulder, Colorado. He specialises in images of the ocean and its creatures. Technically trained in mathematics and computer science, Justin leverages his training in the world of digital photography. Never content living through a computer, he prefers to find himself on the shores of a deserted beach, teaching his four children to be caring and passionate about this fragile world.

www.justinebert.com