

Reportage – Travel Story

Gentle Giants: The whale sharks of Cenderawasih Bay

Like so many other places in the world, also West Papua has its own national marine park. With a surface area of slightly more than 14,000 square kilometres Cenderawasih Bay is also known as the largest protected area of Indonesia. More than thousand species of fish and about five hundred different species of coral are recognized. And regularly there are new discoveries ...

In August 2008, a patrol team of the Cenderawasih National Park made one of the most strange discoveries ever. Unlike almost all other protected parks fishing is still allowed here. But the fishing is done in a very special way. The local fishermen make use of their own made floating fishing platforms, called bagans in the Indonesian language.

The fishermen spent their whole day, some fishermen even weeks in a row on the bagan. At the bottom of each of the bagans, large nets are attached that serve as fishing net or that are even used as floating breeding ponds. The fishing itself happens during the night. Large lamps become inflamed to attract the fish. But, we are here to confirm the rumours which are circulating: apparently whale sharks are coming here daily from the depths to the surface in huge numbers. And ... who does not even dreams to swim or even better to dive face to face with the largest fish in the world, the whale shark or *Rhincodon typus*!

It is four o'clock in the morning, December 18th 2011. We are finally in the Bay of West Papua. A little bit further you can see the small island Ahe. The anchor has been dropped and a few minutes later I hear the speed boats moving. As agreed the day before, some people of the crew are looking and try to find a bagan where whale sharks are spotted. Never before I saw everyone on board so early out of bed! But ... the waiting scares me! One hour later the zodiacs are coming back to the boat. 'And? Are there any whale sharks seen? '

Yes! Yes!! There were three species seen at one of the bagans a little bit further in the Bay. Dive 589 is a dive I will never forget. I already would have been very happy when I saw one whale shark. But the following 95 minutes were simply breathtaking! We started our dive with three whale sharks and sixteen divers and ended the dive with my buddy, nine whale sharks and an almost as good as empty dive bottle.

Once back on board, already a large number of divers are ready to make their second dive. However, as underwater photographers Els and me decide to postpone our next dive with thirty minutes. Not that we are so spoiled, but we would also like to shoot some pictures without the numerous air bubbles and divers. And also because we are even allowed to dive according to the open deck system: you can dive whenever you want, how long you dive and with who.

Our second dive with the whale sharks we only count five species. It sounds funny, there were only five of them! Meanwhile, the local fishermen discovered a special technique to attract the whale sharks. A bucket is thrown in the water and a small special noise resounds: doeng doeng, ..., doeng doeng-

Apparently this sound wears very far and the first whale sharks are coming quite rapidly from the depths to the surface. A small part of the caught sardines is released (?) and thrown by the fishermen in the open sea. It is believed that whale sharks just life of plankton, but it seems that also these small sardines (in Indonesian Ikan Puri) are exactly looking as a delicacy by this huge giant sharks. With their mouth wide open they swim slowly to the nets. As soon as they are between the nets they they really come to the surface and suck huge quantities of water together with the small sardines. But, even though fishermen

call him in Indonesia (partly because the whale shark is also so tame) 'bodoh', literally translated 'stupid shark', they are quiet surely slim. When their stomach is full or when the whale sharks do not get more food they disappear like snow for the sun, and are disappearing again into the depth.

The next morning the visibility is remarkably better. There is also almost as good as no current. And again, arrangements are made with the local fishermen. On and around the Indonesian islands, everything revolves around money. But nowadays the amount of money that need to be paid by the trip organisers to attract the whale sharks is rising every day.

But, we get back in the water for diving. Today the water is clear and beautiful blue. The sun rays break through and some of the other divers are still in bed. Yesterday we noticed that the whale shark is actually quite careful. So today, we approach the whale sharks and go a little bit closer, and closer. Even just to the point where you begin to feel that you actually almost get sucked inside.

And then the sound resounds again: doeng doeng. The scene can start again. Incredible! ... and we just can't get enough of it. First a few small whale sharks of approximately 3 to 4 meters come to the surface. Then some of medium size: 6, 7 and 8 meters. But when the greatest species are popping up (up to 14 meters!) it is getting quite dangerous. It looks like the smaller whale sharks are leaving or disappearing fast when the larger ones come to the surface.

But the whale sharks are fantastic! They are huge, gentle, fearless, beautiful and careful! They move like an airplane and are passing you very slowly. They have no fear of the divers and even occasionally they look at you straight in the eye. And they even like the air bubbles. At few places whale sharks are seen with regularity, but here in West Papua they do come in large numbers every day from the depths to the surface. According to the local fishermen they bring them happiness and they get all the days their share of the spoils. They lure the slightly larger fish into the nets and in exchange they get the smallest sardines, which have a much smaller market value for fishermen. And when the whale sharks get no more food, they even suck occasionally suck to the nets to get the tiniest puri.

The whale sharks of Cenderawasih Bay leave me a huge impression. It is a long way to get in West Papua, and actually we had luck since we were part of one of the few boats that have included this bay in their liveboards schedule. New dive sites are still being discovered. And there is also examined to what extent contemporary divers and fishermen disturb these animals in their daily lives. Meanwhile there is already reached an agreement in securing these animals.

Furthermore, we did not see huge schools of fish in the bay and macro life is even hard to find. But the small island Ahe and Cenderawasih Bay have a huge headliner: diving and snorkeling in 'the home of the whale shark'

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