Where the Walking Shark Lives
It’s the antithesis of the bleached-out, overfished reefs that divers find around the world—a place where the sea is still bursting with life, and hope for the ocean endures. Pull on a tank in Indonesia’s remote Raja Ampat and witness diving’s final frontier.

BY BUCKY McMAHON
The next ten years will be the most important in the next 10,000,

says Sylvia Earle, speaking to a spellbound audience on the luxury live-aboard dive boat the Seven Seas, which lies at anchor in the remote Indonesian archipelago of Raja Ampat. Here, hundreds of miles from the nearest town, the night is primordially dark, utterly silent except for the breathy, gently maternal voice of the prophetess, and when she evokes the astronauts, their epiphanies from space—how it is except for the breathy, gently maternal voice of the light on the morally dark, utterly silent expression, which spent two weeks living beneath the sea. The wine helps, too.

Dr. Earle, who began diving in suits that are now in museums and who first achieved fame in 1970 with NASA’s Tektite II all-women mission, which spent two weeks living beneath the Caribbean Sea, has had the ears of presidents and World Bank officials. At 72, she’s still exploring, still diving—still beautiful, too—and still shouldering the burden of a Cassandra who now in museums and who first achieved fame among a billion stars. The wine helps, too.

“We’ve gone from eating ‘the big, the slow, and the tasty,’” in E.O. Wilson’s words, to consuming everything else, too,” she says. “Krill paste is catching on in Europe. Krill paste! We’re eating it all!” Dr. Earle has shown us a short film about fishing debris, with teams of volunteers hauling up a huge amount of shredded nets and monofilament longlines, a madman’s ball of twine. But it’s not the starving masses predicted by Malthus who are depleting the sea. The deadliest offender is the luxury seafood market—we of the gourmandizing West. “But it’s all bushmeat!” Sylvia says, eyes flashing. “We do nothing to cultivate it; we just extract it as if the supply had no end.” Worse still, the assault with trawler and fork is only

reduces itself to keep at least some of the profit at home. The genius of Seacology has been to cut a better deal for the villages by offering a customized quid pro quo: whatever they need—schools, community centers, solar power—in exchange for long-term protection of the priceless environment. Still, the pressure to extract the islands’ wealth, coming from Indonesia’s east-looking manifest destiny as well as multinational timber corporations, has been relentless. Seacology, Conservation International, and the Nature Conservancy have all entered into this war of wills as the situation in Raja Ampat has heated up.

“I prefer the term hope spot to hot spot,” Dr. Earle says. “What I’m asking you to do now is hold up a mirror—see who you are, what you do best, how you can help. This is a big place. If we can save it, there’s hope for the seal.”

But it’s crunch time on the frontier. Historically, the four main islands—Misool, Salawati, Batanta, and Waigeo (“Raja Ampat” means “Four Kings” in Indonesian)—and more than 600 smaller islands and numerous cays have been protected by their remoteness. The tiny population of ethnic Melanesian Papuans, mainly subsistence fishermen, have been excellent conservators. But when they see big commercial boats from Sulawesi and other populous Indonesian islands whose own local waters have been depleted anchor offshore and wipe out the fish stocks with dynamite, they are tempted—indeed, forced—to blow up the reefs themselves to keep at least some of the profit at home. The genius of Seacology has been to cut a better deal for the villages by offering a customized quid pro quo: whatever they need—schools, community centers, solar power—in exchange for long-term protection of the priceless environment. Still, the pressure to extract the islands’ wealth, coming from Indonesia’s east-looking manifest destiny as well as multinational timber corporations, has been relentless. Seacology, Conservation International, and the Nature Conservancy have all entered into this war of wills as the situation in Raja Ampat has heated up.

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in the skiff cheered. The sea was full to bursting with life, and we, like explorers in a time warp, were about to plunge into waters as wild as those of the ancient past.

About a thousand yards up-current from a classic mushroom-shaped islet, our Indonesian boatman cut the motor and we scrambled to sort out the gear heaped at our feet. Stop and drop: That’s the drill for this sort of high-speed drift-diving. As soon as whoever’s fins were on top of my fins got out of the way, I back-flopped into the blueberry-colored sea, kicking hard to catch up with my fleeting companions. We zoomed straight toward the island at a good three-knot clip, the water warm and uncannily clear. We could see the prow of the reef far ahead, where immense schools of barracuda and long-nosed emperor fish were balled up for feeding. Then we were among them, part of the collective chaos. The best critter finders among us searched out such masters of camouflage as the Papuan scorpion fish, its featherlike fins mimicking crinoids, and tiny oddities such as the orangutan crab, a fuzzy orange dead ringer for the great ape.

During the pre-dive briefing, Dr. Mark Erdmann, a marine biologist for Conservation International and a volunteer guide on this trip (his wife, Arnaz Mehta, is Seacology’s Indonesian rep) with nearly 20 years’ experience diving Indonesian waters, told us the currents that carve these Raja Ampat mushrooms are so strong that from the air the islands look like ships trailing wakes; in fact, one such island, mistaken for a Japanese ship, was bombed by U.S. pilots during WWII. We also learned that in 2001 Erdmann’s friend and fellow marine biologist Gerry Allen set the then world record at Cape Kri for the most species of fish identified during a single dive: 283. So we were ready for the current and we were ready for the fish. But nothing can really prepare you for your first dive at Raja Ampat.

There are about 60 species of coral in the Caribbean; there are closer to 600 in Raja Ampat. And the reefs here support more than 1,000 species of fish, which means if you latch on to a good handhold and start counting, mental fatigue sets in long before you’ve stopped seeing something new. I hadn’t realized just how low my diving expectations had sunk, kicking around hard-bitten, bleach-stricken, fish-out seasapes. It was as if I’d been diving for years on the undersea version of a prairie, and here at last was the rainforest.

After the dive, all of us aboard the Citra Bidadari had the same idea: Ransack the ship’s library and put a name to some of the odder creatures we’d just seen. “I love it,” business consultant Kris Billerter said. “Everybody’s just totally nerdling out with the fish-identification books.” On the sofas of the saloon, we kibitzed and conferred, Macs on laps, UV cables downloading underwater shots to Paint Shop Pro.

Bob and Rosie Heil had just come from China and Tibet; this was their second—or was it third?—trip to Raja Ampat. Suzanna Jamieson, from Düsseldorf, was nuts about nudibranchs. As my roommate, Eric Kanowsky, an IT-startup wizard, put it, “The more you dive, the smaller the things you look for.” Everybody had done a ton of diving, and everybody rated Cape Kri among their best all-time.

During the morning’s second dive, Sardine Reef, we drifted right into a school of bumphead parrotfish, four-foot monsters, about a dozen of them ripping at the coral like blue buffalo and totally oblivious to us. Sardine Reef is also a good place to see the green turtle—a parrot-head with a shell—and the giant clam, a creature with no face at all but in a class of its own when it comes to color. Taken together, the two dives were like an entire career—and all before lunch. Kinda gets your hopes up way.

And this is the thing we shouldn’t have believed but already half expected: Raja Ampat just kept topping itself. At dawn on the third day, the two Seacology boats, which had kept apart to avoid overcrowding the dive sites, steamed together into Mayalibit Bay, essentially
unchanged since Wallace’s three-month collecting expedition in 1860. At its southern entrance, the bay is as narrow as a river winding between mountains, an equatorial fjord, before opening up to an inland sea nearly dividing Waigeo into two halves. When Seacology had first approached Waifo village in 2007 to see what they’d like to have in exchange for limiting fishing in the bay to traditional subsistence catches, they said they wanted sidewalks—nice, wide cement walkways to replace the dirt tracks that held puddles and mosquitoes and disease. And so, that noon, Seacology’s board members and donors, festooned with crowns of trumpet vines, were given a hero’s welcome, parading into the village center along that cement path at the head of a marching band of drums and fifes. Everybody was given a piece of cake and a seat in the shade. Babies cried, elders speechified, hands were shaken, and then all feasted on a spread of fish and swimming crabs and local mussels.

Ever the scientist, Sylvia Earle carefully examined an odd-shaped, snakeskin-textured fruit, took out her camera and photographed it from every angle, and then ate it for dessert. She was more effusive than anybody about the diving we’d enjoyed so far, though with a caveat. “This is the way it’s supposed to be everywhere,” she said. “A coral reef is a true metropolis, with millions of interconnected lives.”

AT ALUII BAY, on the west side of Waigeo, the oddest beast I’ve ever seen came crawling out of the dark in the weirdest place I’ve ever dived. The dive site, a shallow patch of muck, lay underneath the dock of a pearl farm, a far-flung place, to be sure, like a trading post out of a Conrad novel. A moonless night set the proper mood for poking about with dive lights. The first creature my scuba buddies illuminated was a giant sea snail caught in the act of extruding a gelatinous string of Ping-Pong-ball-size eggs onto one of the dock’s outer pylons. Just inside the first row of pil- lars, a fire urchin, the size and color of a jack-o’-lantern, with short spines and what appeared to be feathers, lay cheek by jowl with a sea hare—a grandiosely proportioned sea slug, a regular Jabba the Hutt. Mesmerized, I watched a certain flatworm, trying to figure
GETTING THERE: Singapore Airlines flies to Singapore from LAX and JFK (round-trip, $1,150; singaporeair.com). From there you can fly via domestic carriers to Manado, on the island of Sulawesi, or to Bali's Denpasar International Airport and connections to all outer-island destinations. Cathay Pacific flies from LAX and JFK to Denpasar via Hong Kong (round-trip, $1,250; cathaypacific.com). TO STAY: Singapore Airlines Resort, on Kualoa (from $120; sasg.co.id). WHERE TO STAY: From Manado, fly Merpati to Sorong ($120), then on empty beaches. GETTING THEREH. From Manado, fly Merpati to Gorontalo ($70), where you'll board a 15-hour ferry to Wakai, the main harbor on the Togian Islands. WHERE TO STAY: Kadidiri Paradise Resort, on Kadidiri Island (bungalows, $32, all-inclusive; 011-62-46-419-58). BALIKPAPAN BAY, KALIMANTAN WHAT TO DO: Dive recently discovered WWII wrecks — Japanese military cargo boats torpedowed by the U.S. Navy during the 1942 Battle of Balikpapan — at this industrial port. You'll descend into holds housing coral-encrusted bombs and torpedoes. GETTING THERE: Garuda flies daily from Denpasar to Kupang ($62). You will have to stay overnight, then board a ferry to Roti (four hours; $12). WHERE TO STAY: The Jimmy Surf House (from $100, including surf guide and excursions; rotiesurfhouse.com), a boutique property managed by a South American couple. (He's an accomplished surf guide from Uruguay; she's a European-trained chef from Argentina.) GILL TRAWANGAN, LOMBOK WHAT TO DO: For decades, backpackers have made the hop from Bali for a dip in the warm, turquoise waters of the tiny Gili islands, off the coast of Lombok. Gill Trawangan (pop. 1,000), the farthest out, has the best dining and lodging options. Paddle the Gils with Karma Kayak (half day, $32, full day, $48; kar makayak.com). WHERE TO GO: Take the daily two-and-a-half-hour fast boat, the Mahi Mahi, from Serangan Harbor, on Bali, direct to Gill T ($70; gillparadise.com). WHERE TO STAY: Kelapa Luxury Villas offers plush one-, two-, and three-bedroom houses with private pools (from $185; kelapavillas.com). GUNUNG RINJANI, LOMBOK WHAT TO DO: At 12,224 feet, Indonesia's second-Highest volcano is a pilgrimage site both for the Hindus of Bali and for Lombok's Muslim Sasak people. From the summit you'll look down on a 3.7-mile-wide caldera with a crescent-shaped cobalt lake, hot springs, and Bali in the distance. GETTING THERE: From Bali, fly to Maubara on Merpati ($31). WHERE TO STAY: In your tent. The most established outfitter on the mountain, Rinjani Lombok, offers a four-day trek ($270; rinjanimombok.com). CANGGU, BALI WHAT TO DO: Canggu is home to the island's least-trampled beaches and most accessible surf breaks. Challenge yourself at Echo Beach, where you'll paddle out with local and international pros. Beware: The water gets big, riptides tug, boards snap, and a few lives are lost each year. GETTING THERE: Canggu is an easy 40-minute, $15 cab ride from the Denpasar airport. WHERE TO STAY: Book a luxe beach pad through Bali Ultimate Villas (four-to six-bedroom villas, $400–$2,350; www.baliultimatevillas.com). UDBUD, BALI WHAT TO DO: Bali's cultural hub is home to painters, craftsmen, musicians, and dancers and is a base for year-round yoga retreats. BaliSpirit (balispirit.com) is the island's online clearinghouse of all mind/body classes and events. GETTING THERE: The $20 cab ride from Denpasar takes about 50 minutes. WHERE TO STAY: Ubud Hanging Gardens (doubles from $270; ubudhangingsgardens.com), 15 minutes north of town in tiny Balian, is hard to beat. Guests stay in two-story villas with heated infinity pools overlooking the Jade Ayung River. —ADAM SKOLNICK
I was undergoing painful physical therapy. It was like a patient lurching over the rubble—right fins forward, push!—like a patient undergoing painful physical therapy. It was amazing to watch, and we would have until we ran out of air, but at last, annoyed by the attention, I swam off quite briskly.

There's an evolutionary riddle for you: Why does the walking shark walk when, like any self-respecting elasmobranch, it can swim just fine when it chooses to and, in fact, it walks rather poorly?

The question stuck with me as we steamed south for Misool, where I had my own little Darwinian crisis. I've said that we were all advanced divers on this trip, but I was the least advanced, the one who had everything last and used up his air supply first, and at a site near Misool's Wayalibatan Channel I was nearly deselected for my lack of fitness. It happened at a spectacular wall called FantaSea, an enchanted forest of gorgonian sea fans waving in the five-knot current. As we had traveled south, the visibility had declined from incredible to merely very good, owing to nutrient-rich upwellings, and the density of fish had just gone crazy. These southern reefs were loud with life—the clickings and scrapings of claw and tooth like the din of cicadas—and visually furious, gouts of color flung and splattered.

On this dive, though, everyone was looking for pygmy sea horses, a Raja Ampat specialty. The creature is tiny—about the size of a grain of rice—and mimics perfectly the tint and the texture of its favorite hiding place, the screen-like grid of the gorgonian sea fan. To find the animal you must comb through the leaves as if looking for fleas on a great shaggy dog. Even when your keen-eyed dive guide has found one for you, it's hard to see without a magnifying glass. Yet, with those anise-seed eyes, the blunt plumped muzzle, the cunningly rubbed pastel hide, it has its own curious charisma, equal to the whale's. So people said, anyway, I still hadn't seen one.

I was determined not to be shut out, so every time one of the guides rapped on his tank, I kicked like mad to get into viewing position—up, down, back—until at last: Bingo! Excellent! Tiny! Cool! And then I noticed my Suunto dive computer flashing, warning me I was about to go into decompression mode—a big no-no, especially in a strong current. I also noticed I was nearly out of air. So I signaled to my group that I was heading up and began kicking for the surface. I spent my three-minute safety stop at a depth of 15 feet congratulating myself on having, almost definitely, seen a pygmy. When I broke the surface, the Citra Bidakari was nowhere in sight; the Zodias were elsewhere as well, and the current was still motoring me toward Antarctica and kicking up four-foot haystacks, which would make me nearly impossible to find. Fortunately, I had a signaling device—a bright-orange inflatable sausage—for which I silently thanked Seaology's executive director, Duane Silverstein, and his pre-trip checklist. This I held above me at arm's length. It barely topped the waves. I yelled "Help!" a couple of times. That was dumb. Five minutes later, I dropped my weight belt, the first time I'd ever taken that drastic measure, and five minutes after that I began to think I'd really been forgotten, and what a long and lousy death I was going to die.

Of course, the able boatmen of the Citra Bidakari would never lose a customer. Twenty minutes after surfacing, I heard the growl of an outboard and soon saw my very good friend Dewey racing to the rescue. But in that interval of treading water, I'd had ample opportunity to hold up a mirror, as Sylvia Earle had asked, and see who I was and what I did best. I'm someone who expects the worst, is surprised by the best, and somehow survives to tell the story. So if the worst comes to pass—as I expect it will—and Raja Ampat is blasted to smithereens for frozen fish sticks, and the seas all die and all of us along with them, there's a certain shark in Aljui Bay that's ready to crawl up the beach and start the whole thing over again.

CORRESPONDENT BUCKY McMAHON'S BOOK NIGHT DIVER (ANHINGA PRESS) WAS RELEASED IN PAPERBACK IN MAY.