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# Tubbataha Reef

—The Crown Jewel of Philippines Diving

Text by Duane Silverstein and Ferdie Marcelo. Photos by Randy Wright and David Reubush

The word *tubbataha* is a combination of two Samal words, *tubba* and *taha*, which together mean “a long reef exposed at low tide.” But today the name Tubbataha is synonymous with a different definition—the best dive location in the Philippines. About 180 kilometers (110 miles) south of Palawan Island, Tubbataha is a coral reef in the Sulu Sea, Philippines, consisting of three distinct parts: the huge North and South Atolls and the smaller Jessie Beazley Reef. In 1981, it became the first national marine park in the Philippines under the leadership of then President Corazon Aquino, and in 1993, Tubbataha was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Just last year, CNNgo.com named this 130,000 hectare site one of the world's top ten dive spots.

I recently visited Tubbataha through my work as director of Seacology, a non-governmental organization (NGO) whose sole purpose is preserving the marine and terrestrial ecosystems of islands throughout the world. Seacology has 240 projects in 51 countries throughout the globe where deals are made to provide an island village something tangible it needs such as a school or fresh water delivery system in return for establishing a marine or forest reserve.

One such project is on the small island of Manamoc in the Philippines where we provided the requested solar energy system in return for support of a 267 acre marine protected area. This past April, I led a group of Seacology donors to the Philippines to see our project on



RANDY WRIGHT



USS *Guardian* aground on Tubbataha Reef in the Philippines

Manamoc and spend a week diving the reefs of Tubbataha.

I have visited the Philippines on many occasions and dived some of her magnificent reefs. But every time I mentioned where I had been I would get the same response: “The diving there is quite good but if you want

One of the reasons Tubbataha diving was supposed to be so good is its remoteness from human activity. There are no villages within 150 kilometers of Tubbataha, which means little pollution and little pressure from divers. The only way to dive Tubbataha is on a liveboard dive boat, and due to potential rough seas caused by seasonal climate changes, Tubbataha can only be dived between early March and early June of each year.

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*Hippocampus denise* seahorse

to see world-class diving you should go to Tubbataha.”

### Ship groundings

As the time of our trip rapidly approached I could hardly contain my excitement about diving this isolated reef. However, just two months before our trip I received terrible news. The U.S. minesweeper USS *Guardian* ran aground on Tubbataha's south atoll—2,345 square meters of the reef were damaged by this grounding, which the U.S. Navy's own report attributed to a “lack of leadership”.

Everyone breathed a huge sigh of relief when on March 30 shortly before our trip to Tubbataha the last section of the USS *Guardian* was lifted off the South Reef by a crane. There was great sadness over the damage done to the reef, but this was ameliorated to a small extent



Diver with large cuttlefish on reef



RANDY WRIGHT

by knowing that finally the boat was gone and could not do any more harm. Now we can once again think of our impending trip and perhaps even see for ourselves the extent of the damage done by this horrible accident.

Then the near impossible happened. Just one day before our flight from Manila to Puerto Princesa (the departure point for most liveaboards), another ship went aground on Tubbataha. How could this happen twice in such a short period of time particularly at a UNESCO World Heritage Site that is nowhere near a major shipping lane?

My first reaction upon reading this news was the same as that attributed to Philippine President Benigno Aquino III: "This must be some mistake. This can't be happening again!" Or in the oft-quoted words of famed U.S. baseball player Yogi Berra, "It's déjà vu all over again!"

This time the culprit was a Chinese fishing vessel, the F/V *Min Long Yu* (whose cargo, as I'll explain, was anything but fish). And this time, the damage was a lot worse. Nearly 4,000 square meters were destroyed, including some massive corals over 500 years old. As one official stated, "It bulldozed through vibrant coral reefs

leaving a highway of destruction in its wake."

Our trip, however, was still a go so later that same day we boarded the scuba liveboard, the *Atlantis Azores*, which is a former Aggressor fleet ship that was recently renovated. The boat was in excellent shape, the hard-working crew was spectacular and the food was very good. The rooms below deck were on the small side and did not have windows or portholes, but the friendliness of the crew more than made up for these minor shortcomings.

During the course of the week a tank was accidentally dropped on my gear, and consequently, my regulator and flashlight were damaged. Though I was not pleased with this, I have dived enough to know that accidents will happen. The captain

and crew were extremely apologetic and took immediate responsibility. They lent me replacement gear at no cost and told me to take my damaged equipment to my favorite dive shop back in the States, and they paid the bill by credit card, no questions asked. I was impressed with the way they handled this mishap.

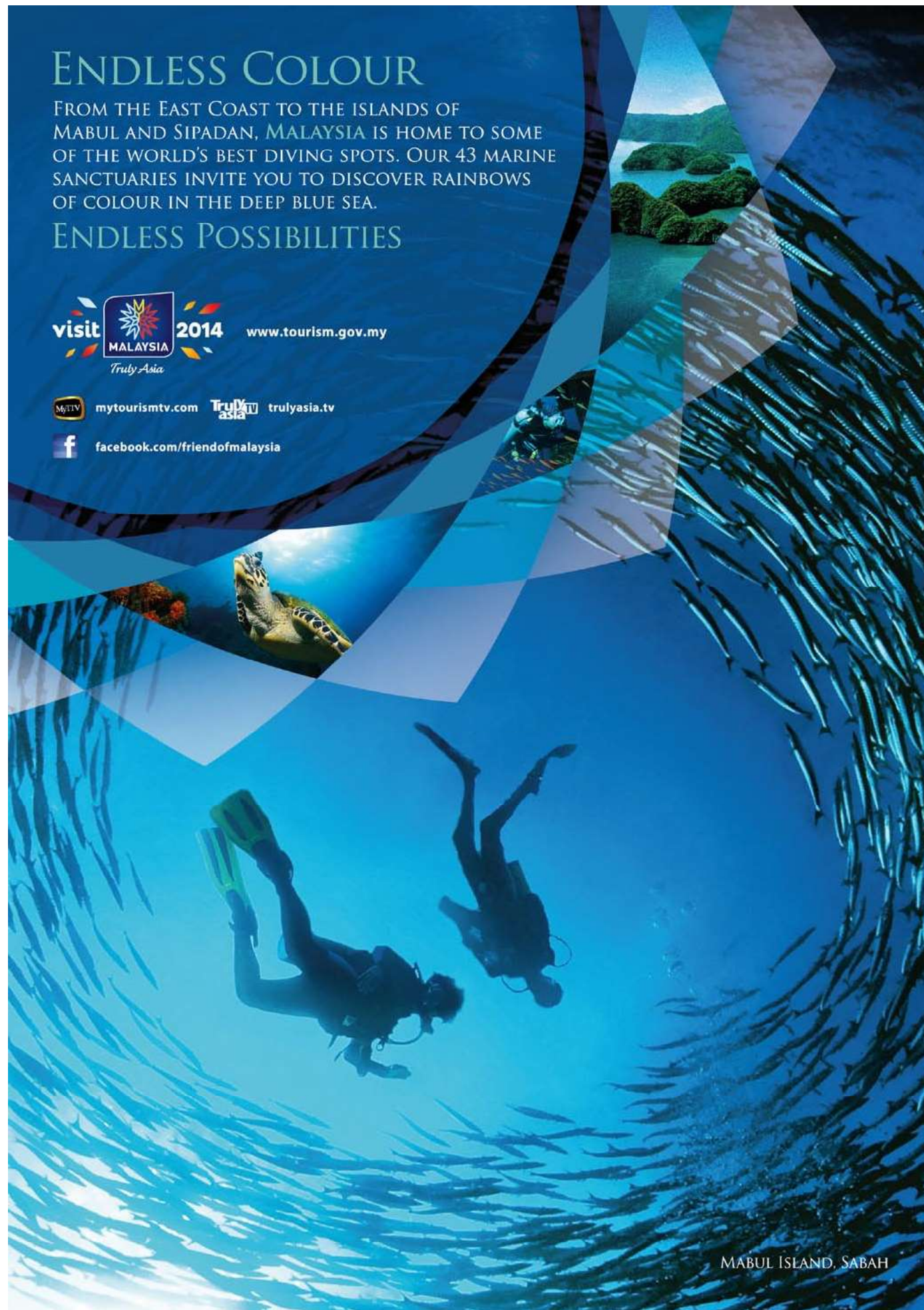
### Diving Tubbataha

But how was the diving in Tubbataha? In a word, excellent. During the course of the week, I saw more sharks than I have in years, particularly in Jessie Beazley Reef. I also have not dived with this many turtles in a long while, and for the first time ever, saw a pair of mating turtles. The occasional napoleon wrasse, large tuna and large schools of jacks added to the enjoyment of the dives.

## ENDLESS COLOUR

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## ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES



MABUL ISLAND, SABAH





Reef shark resting in its hiding place on the reef

there are more in the Galapagos. Tubbataha has a lot of pygmy seahorses, but there are more in Raja Ampat. Tubbataha has good visibility, but you can find better viz in the Solomon Islands. Tubbataha has a lot of nudibranchs, but you can see more in other parts of the Philippines. However, when you add things up, Tubbataha is one of the best rounded dive sites in the world.

To me, the key to Tubbataha's beauty is its remoteness from human activity. Other reefs are

Except where there was old damage from blast fishing and, of course, the two recent groundings, the reef itself is in excellent shape. And Tubbataha has plenty of small creatures as well. I saw many pygmy seahorses, nudibranchs and various fingernail size crabs. There were many opportunities for night dives which ranged in interest from so-so to one dive where an octopus spent 30 minutes putting on so many poses for us that we nicknamed it "Zoolander".

I cannot give a personal assessment of the damage caused by either boat, as we were not allowed to dive the sites closest to where the USS *Guardian* went aground. This was allegedly so that the area could begin to recuperate, but I suspect the real motivation was to prevent divers from taking photos of the damaged reefs. Nor could we dive the area near the F/V *Min Long Yu*, as it was still aground when we were there. It has since been removed.

We did however pay a visit to the ranger station that sits less than two kilometers from the point where the *Min Long Yu* went aground. The rangers

told us that the ship was carrying 2,870 dead pangolins, an endangered scaly anteater found on Palawan Island. These were probably destined for the shelves of Chinese drugstores alongside rhino horns and remnants of other threatened species.

The rangers told us that the 'fishermen' on board the *Min Long Yu* offered them a bribe of US\$2,400 for their quick release. This proffer was refused, and the culprits are now in jail.

I have a theory as to why Tubbataha is not better known than it is amongst international dive circles. Tubbataha is an all around excellent dive site but it does not rate as the world's best in any one criterion. Tubbataha has a lot of sharks, but

too close to human settlements and are thus extremely vulnerable to over-extraction and degradation from pollution. That is unless the island community nearest the reef actively protects and conserves it. And this is precisely what is happening in Manamoc Island in the Philippines with the help of Seacology.



Pair of sea turtles mating

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DIVE & DISCOVER





Children welcome the delegation visiting the Seacology solar energy system in the village of Manamoc in the Philippines; Diver hovers over lush soft corals on reef (far right)



## Community action

One of the major problems besetting island communities like Manamoc is the lack of reliable electricity. Its generators depend on fossil fuel, which has to be imported to the island and is very susceptible to price increases. The very high cost of power makes it difficult for villages to provide efficient and effective services to the community. Moreover, the community's generators are usually turned on only at dusk and turned off at midnight. In the local high school, for instance, students and teachers had to shell out personal money to purchase gasoline for the sole generator within the school to power at least two of the six working computer units in their classroom.

In 2008, Seacology funded several solar power supply systems for the community health center, village hall, community training cum multi-purpose center, public high school, public elementary school and the pre-school center—all in exchange for their commitment to protect a nearby 108-hectare marine protected area (MPA). Our local partner, the Andres Soriano Foundation (ASF), has been reporting that the solar power systems are serving the community well, and that the MPA is being strictly enforced

as a no-take zone. Shortly after our visit to Tubbataha, a Seacology delegation visited Manamoc to see for ourselves what is actually happening on the ground.

On our arrival we were met by dancing children, ASF staff and village officials who briefed us on the status of the MPA. Fish counts have tripled between 2008 and 2012. In 2008, there was only 25 percent hard coral cover, whereas now hard coral covers 50 percent of the reserve. The villagers have organized their own fish warden group, which continuously patrols the MPA. Poachers, invariably other fisher folk originating from neighboring islands, are apprehended and fined. Through the fines collected, the villagers were eventually able to purchase a patrol boat exclusively for this purpose.

After the brief presentation at the beach, we were taken around the village where we saw the solar power systems at work, most notably at the health center where temperature sensitive medicine such as vaccines are now refrigerated, and the high school where students can now learn

and practice computer skills regardless of their families' ability to pay for fuel. This project is a good example of what can happen when a highly motivated village such as Manamoc works with a terrific local NGO such as ASF with the support of Seacology.

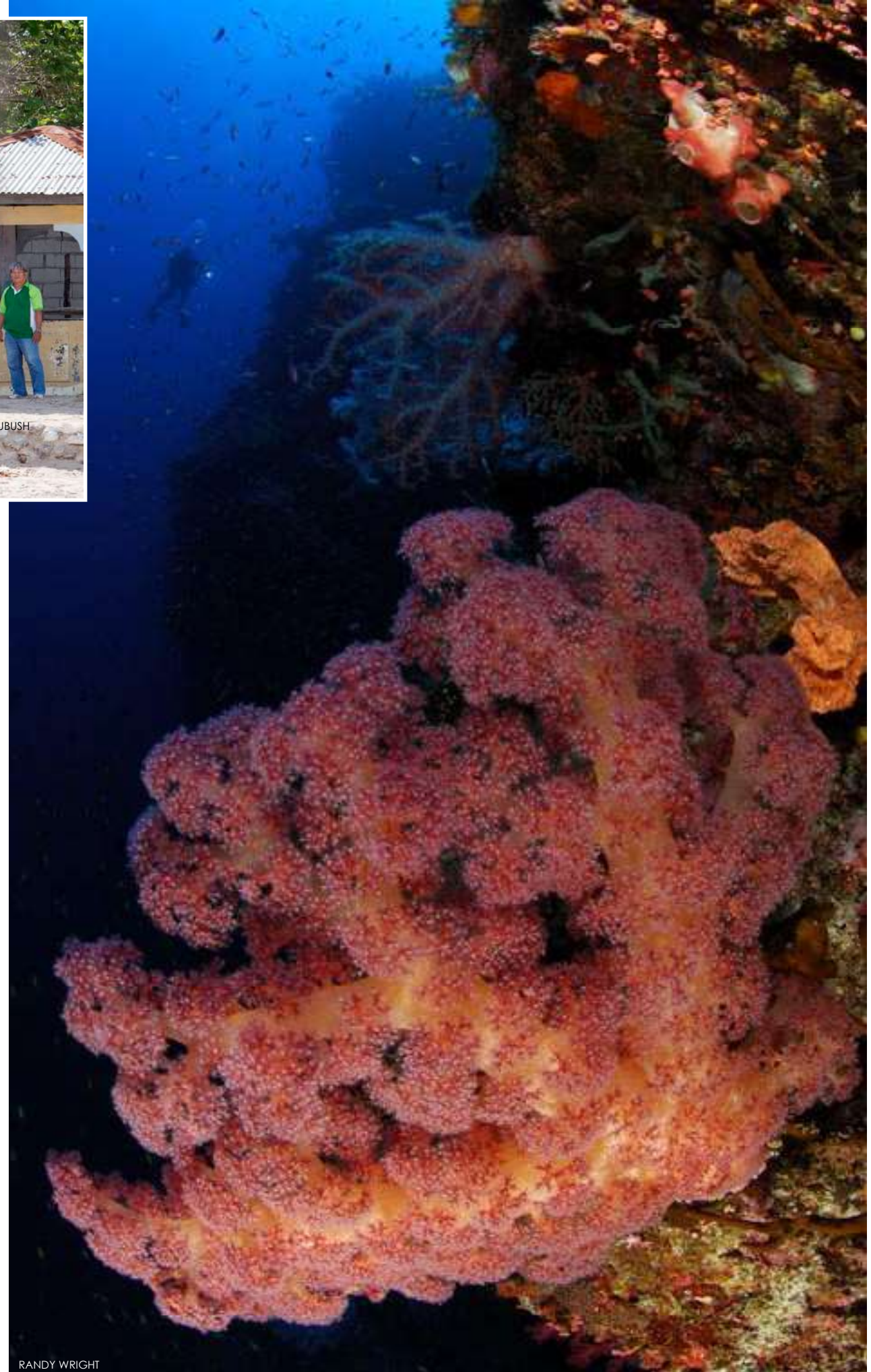
Our Seacology expedition to Tubbataha and Manamoc Island offers critical lessons in the management of the Earth's remaining wildlife resources. No spot on this planet is sufficiently isolated from potential damage done by humankind. A single ship grounding can instantly obliterate wide areas of coral for decades if not centuries to come. Wanton poaching for whatever purpose can drive a species to extinction. And a small island community taking responsibility for the protection of its marine resources can cause these areas to flourish, translating to increased bounty within nearby designated fishing areas. ■

*Duane Silverstein is the executive director and Ferdie Marcelo is the Philippines Field Representative for Seacology an NGO whose sole purpose is preserving the marine and terrestrial ecosystems of islands throughout the world. For more information about Seacology, which has protected almost two million acres of island marine and terrestrial habitat, or to find out more about and Seacology's expeditions, visit [Seacology.org](http://Seacology.org)*

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