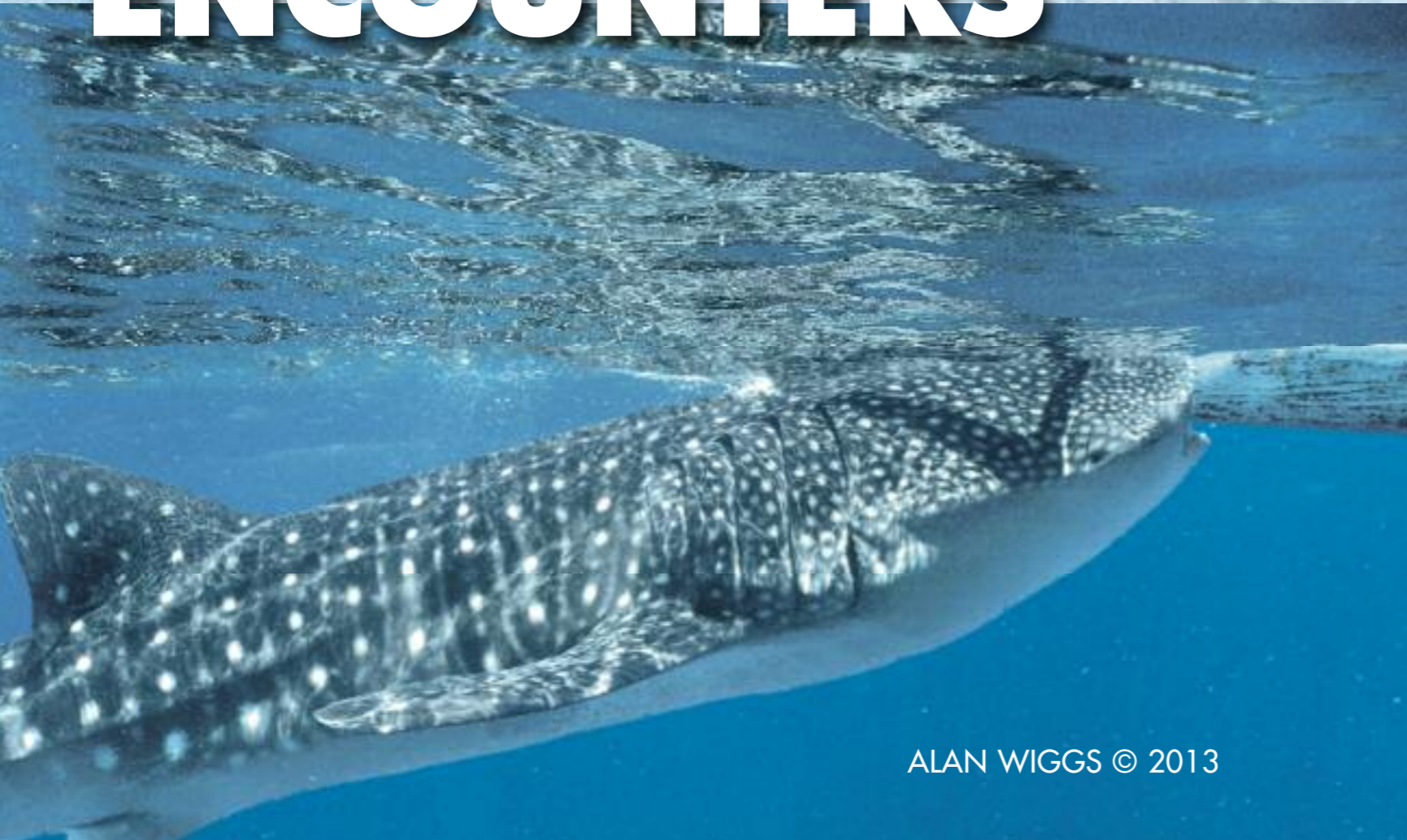


UNFORGETTABLE ENCOUNTERS



ALAN WIGGS © 2013

IN 33 YEARS I'D ONLY ONCE DIVED WITH A WHALE SHARK – IT WAS A BRIEF OFF-SEASON GLIMPSE OF A SPOTTED GIANT IN THE MALDIVES. NO PHOTOS, JUST A FADING MEMORY OF WATCHING THE LARGEST FISH IN THE WORLD DISAPPEAR INTO THE HAZE. MY SECOND ENCOUNTER WITH *RHINCODON TYPUS* WAS ENTIRELY DIFFERENT – UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL WITH FOUR OF THESE MAGNIFICENT CREATURES.



In mid 2012 I brought another a group of divers and families to Dumaguete on Negros in the Philippines. It was our third visit here so we knew we'd have superb diving with great biodiversity. We settled into our home on the beach with Apo Island glistening in the warm sunshine. Open Water Course candidates were soon bubbling in the pool, while more experienced divers set up their gear for their first dive on the house reef. Snorkellers checked out the thriving fish life off the beach, discovering clownfish, slithering snowflake moray eels, or being buzzed by a large titan triggerfish with a bad attitude and a mean set of teeth! Batteries were charged, and o-rings greased for dives at Apo Island. Others relaxed by the pool or began organising their local tours.

The glassy calm seas and hot sunshine were the perfect escape from Melbourne's dreary winter. Diving the Dauin coastline south of Dumaguete has gained a reputation for macro with a mix of muck diving interspersed with healthy coral bommies and has been described as 'Lembeh with visibility'! You can expect to see various frogfish, ornate ghost pipefish, fields of garden eels and nudibranchs plus solitary great barracuda and pulsating schools of red toothed triggerfish. Just 30 minutes away, Apo Island delivers classic blue water, pristine hard corals, loads of green turtles, spiralling schools of trevally and, on the last trip, a free-swimming whale shark. I was restricted to the surface; according to my diving doctor a badly broken arm in a fibreglass cast made scuba highly risky. He'd emphasised all sorts of issues including the likely increased risk of DCS, and the dangers of being in a hostile environment! But I enjoyed the swims in the shallows, including being immersed in a school of tiny Klein's butterflyfish at Dauin South which pecked at the hairs on the back of my hand! When you are still and quiet with no tank and noisy bubbles, it is amazing what you see!

Highlights of the trip were many – the Filipino people were universally friendly, kind and generous with their smiles. But one of the most incredible experiences this and any trip was at the fishing village of Oslob on nearby Cebu. From around October 2011

local fishermen developed an unusual relationship with a large number of whale sharks or 'butanding' in the local dialect. The whale sharks fed on shrimp or 'uyap' over the local reefs and had started to follow the fishermen catching juvenile shrimp during the evenings. The shrimp rise with the moon and move into the shallows, followed by feeding whale sharks that move right into the shoreline. A few handfuls of casually offered uyap established a pattern of behaviour which has continued since.

The fishermen soon realised the tourist potential this attraction offered, and the word went out. Things rapidly escalated and soon Oslob was bursting at the seams; there were reports of up to 2000 people arriving in one day, clumsy touching and harassment, and finally a photo of a young lady standing (yes... standing!) on the back of a whale shark (it wasn't from Oslob – but it could have been). Atmosphere Resort and the Dumaguete Dive Association acted quickly to boycott the site early in 2012 as something had to be done. Management guidelines were introduced that were amongst the most stringent anywhere, though application and



reinforcement were slow to develop. One major step was to increase Marine Park fees, effectively pricing out a lot of the locals (sad in some respects, but there were just too many people!) An Education Centre was set up where snorkellers were briefed on guidelines which include the obvious ones such as no touching; no flash photography and a minimum distance of 5 metres from fuselage and 6 metres from the tail. All power boats were prohibited in the Marine Park and the restriction of 30 minutes in water also helped reduce crowding, and the feeding closed off each day at 1:00 p.m.

By early July 2012, Gabriele Holder, Dive Manager at Atmosphere Resort, was cautiously satisfied that the situation had improved and we were the first group to be given the chance to snorkel with the Oslob whale sharks. We were offered this as a day trip with a mixture of minibus and ferry transfers over to Oslob – roughly two hours each way. Atmosphere Resort has adopted the WWF policies of no scuba, though it's a doubtful benefit as the butanding are very much at the surface.

Oslob now has a cottage whale shark tourism industry and small stalls sell sharky T-shirts and trinkets from leaf thatch shelters; just off the beach the dugout canoes are moored, and there's an occasional glimpse of rounded dorsal fins. We geared up, were briefed at the centre and clambered awkwardly aboard the tiny outriggers, our diveboats for the morning. Sliding below the glassy surface, we found four butanding in our field of view. We tried to observe the 'five metre rule' but they often came in closer – one almost backed into another whilst trying to avoid the one in front! There was no crowding, only a few groups of snorkelers were in the water at three or four feeding stations hundreds of metres apart. With some 20(!) butanding in the bay that morning it was easy to disperse the groups. What I saw reassured me about the management – the whole situation was handled well by the local 'shark-spotters' who seemed to display genuine concern, even affection, for the magnificent creatures. It was inspiring, beautiful, unique. Though we were only allowed 30 minutes in the water, it was 30 minutes immersed in their presence, closer than I'd expected. The whale sharks came to us' rather than we to them.

There's been some understandable controversy over this feed, which is fairly typical of similar interactions, including other shark feeds at various dive sites around the planet. It must be recognised this is a fairly artificial experience, as the butanding are 'held' in the area by intermittent feeding from the local fishermen. The few handfuls of shrimp supplements not replaces their normal feeding patterns but there are understandably concerns whether this may interrupt their natural migrations.

Steve de Neef, Atmosphere Resort's photo-pro, is currently researching with LAMAVE (Large Marine Vertebrate Project) and has identified 47 whale sharks moving through the area, with between six and nine staying as residents. So, there is some evidence that many of the sharks are moving on. But, Steve also photographed 'Fermin', a large male with a worrying set of parallel gashes that may be the result of a boat propeller. Although only outrigger canoes with paddles are allowed at Oslob, it is possible that the association of 'boat equals shrimp handout' could have led to conflict with a power boat outside the Marine Park.

Another issue is the concerning precedent this sets, as there are now reports of a similar activity developing at Moalboal. So where does it all end? While this may not be a perfect relationship, it certainly is preferable to what happened only a few years ago, when some of these whale sharks may well been captured and butchered for village consumption despite being 'protected'. This protection has proved inadequate in many parts of the Philippines and in 2010 a whale shark was found dying in the shallows of Tingloy province with every fin hacked off. Another found in June 2011 had been stabbed six times and its tail cut off. Still known as 'tofu shark' in some parts of Asia, what we see at Oslob is certainly a more sustainable approach, though the costs and benefits need to be weighed and more research must be done. And on the positive side, the presence of so many sharks in one place provides unique opportunities for scientific research.

Yes, it is at the very least, an intrusion. But so are the boatloads of divers hitting Blue Corner at Palau day after day, or Barracuda Point at Sipadan. We dominate and intrude everywhere from the slopes of the Himalaya to the penguin





Caption

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rookeries of Antarctica. But tourism might yet save the penguins of Antarctica, the trevally at Sipadan or the whale sharks of the Philippines. By the time this article hits the stands it may all be over – either the butanding may have moved on, or regulations forbidding their feeding may have been introduced.

We returned to a freezing cold three degree Melbourne winter morning still amazed by what we'd witnessed. The butanding were just the icing on the cake for another superb trip to The Philippines – an unexpected bonus we hadn't signed on for. Dumaguete, the town of the gentle people, and Atmosphere Resort will always be one of my favourite options, whale sharks or not.

If you get the chance, go experience the Oslob whale sharks and make up your own mind...

