

## Conservation Heroes

Not too long ago, greenwashing was so prolific that the term itself became overused. But more and more tourism providers around Asia-Pacific have been taking sincere sustainable strides, and we'd like to tip our sun hats to these green-hospitality groundbreakers. If visiting the beach inspires you to seek out ways to save it, consider the following eco-pillars and the resorts that do them admirably.



A METALLIC TAP-TAP on the divemaster's tank prompts me to look down the vertical reef wall, where a two-meter-long blue-and-green Napoleon wrasse darts upwards and flashes back down, followed by a sleek and silvery shark. The two dance aggressively, and I'm astonished to see a giant trevally ease over to check out the action. Sulawesi, just east of Borneo in Indonesia, is home to astonishing marine wonders—none of which, my local divemaster makes sure I understand, I am to come close to touching. He explains that this may damage the living corals, or stress the animals. His livelihood depends on sustainable tourism, and healthy reefs feed his community.

Alas, not every guide is so conscientious. Before I surface, I hear a noise that raises my blood pressure. It's the sound of uninformed snorkelers standing where they shouldn't. It's the crunching and breaking of coral.

Tourism, of the mass variety especially, has wreaked havoc on coastal and island environments, creating a hard-to-reconcile tension between conservation and exploitation. We should think about getting back to the beach with an eye to maintaining the widespread benefits of travel: Local economies depend on visitors, and first-hand experience of these beautiful environments often inspires conservation, after all. Aside from the usual hotel cost-savings dressed up as eco-initiatives, here are a few ways tourism operators are helping us to tread a little more lightly in our flippers.



Photographing mantas at Four Seasons Resort Maldives Landaa Giraavaru. Top: Don't touch the turtles at Batu Batu Resort.

### 1 SENSITIVE MARINE ANIMAL INTERACTIONS

If your holiday plans include interacting with wildlife, always ask yourself if you could be inadvertently harming the very creatures you came to admire. Some offerings are badged as "conservation" but are actually run for profits, not the animals.

Take turtles. Increasing numbers of resorts are offering sea-turtle experiences, but not all are based on science. **Batu Batu Resort** ([batubatu.com.my](http://batubatu.com.my); doubles from RM2,077 for a two-night stay) on Pulau Tengah, in southeast Malaysia, though, has an excellent program that offers a non-intrusive experience for guests. The resort funds Tengah Island Conservation and the salaries of its four biologists whose mandate includes protecting endangered green and hawksbill turtle eggs from poaching or consumption by monitor lizards. Nests are relocated to a fenced enclosure; for the safety of the turtles, they are not kept swimming in tanks for release at a convenient time and guests do not handle hatchlings.

Instead, you can opt to receive a phone call when turtles hatch (day or night), and hurry to the beach to witness the babies scamper across the sand to the ocean. Adopt a turtle nest and you'll receive a video of your hatchlings. For those with an interest in marine or environmental science, conservation internships are available.



Clockwise from left: Dive crew at Atmosphere Resort; Six Senses Laamu safeguards seagrass; an Ocean Quest coral propagation class at Adang Sea Divers; Gayana Marine Resort restocks reefs with giant clams.

In the Maldives, travelers wishing to engage in conservation while snorkeling can try the Manta Scientist for a Day program at **Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Landaa Giraavaru** ([fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com); doubles from US\$2,105). In conjunction with the Maldivian Manta Ray Project in Baa Atoll UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve, you'll shoot underwater photos of the mantas to help identify them, a key aspect in their conservation.

### 2 SAFEGUARDING MARINE HABITATS

Marine habitats include coral reefs, mangroves and seagrass beds, all vital for providing homes and food for marine life. In addition to the coral bleaching caused by global warming, marine habitats can become degraded by direct tourism activities.

In the Philippines, **Atmosphere Resort** ([atmosphereresorts.com](http://atmosphereresorts.com); doubles from P11,607) on Negros Island seeks to tread lightly in many ways. Their scuba diving operation requires everyone who straps on a tank to be educated on protecting corals. Divers watch a video introducing them to the reef safety policy of not touching anything, not wearing gloves (as this encourages touching), and never feeding animals. The dive boats (like the rooms and restaurant) ban single-use plastics and do not use anchors, which can damage reefs. The resort's marine



biologist delivers scientific lectures and reef clean-ups are conducted in collaboration with NGOs: Project AWARE and the Ocean Conservancy. The resort assists the Institute for Marine Research in collecting monitoring data of the region's reefs.

Many resorts now manage coral rehabilitation projects to assist reefs in recovering from bleaching and historical damage. The most responsible programming we've seen in the region is by **Ocean Quest Global** ([oceanquest.global](http://oceanquest.global)), which has developed a method of natural propagation without invasive materials. The organization trains local communities and dive centers throughout Southeast Asia in their process, and is helping them make their livelihoods sustainably from reefs. One place where tourists can get involved is at **Adang Sea Divers** ([adangseadivers.com](http://adangseadivers.com); propagation courses Bt4,000 to Bt15,000). On Thailand's Koh Lipe anyone with an interest, from landlubbers up to advanced divers, is welcome to join their selection of different Ocean Quest

conservation and coral-propagation courses in the surrounding national marine park.

Also threatened are the colorful giant clams found on many tropical reefs. Giant clams clean seawater as they feed, and their presence is used as an indicator of reef health. However, they are becoming endangered due to poaching—for sales in the aquarium trade or as a delicacy in some Asian cuisines. **Gayana Marine Resort** ([echoresorts.com](http://echoresorts.com); doubles from RM1,272) on Gaya Island, in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, employs scientists to breed and restock reefs with giant clams, and guests can work with them as a "marine biologist for a day" to gain first-hand insights.

### 3 COASTAL PROTECTION

As trees, hotel buildings and even swimming pools have crumbled into the ocean, the tourism industry has been learning the hard way how much infrastructure built close to beaches can upset the process of sand deposition—an especially pressing problem now

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF BATU BATU RESORT; COURTESY OF FOUR SEASONS RESORT MALDIVES

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF ATMOSPHERE RESORT; COURTESY OF SIX SENSES LAAMU; COURTESY OF ADANG SEA DIVERS; CAROLYN BEASLEY