



# opinion



Text by Simon Pridmore  
Photos by Brandi Mueller

Over the years, many people have come into the scuba diving industry driven by a dream. This dream is to find a small, sunny corner of the world where the reefs are healthy and where they might set up a little dive resort.

The resort would be built by village craftsmen and designed to leave as small an ecological footprint as possible. Materials would be sourced locally, without destruction of either reef or forest. The use of plastics and chemicals would be minimal, and the sewage and trash disposed of responsibly.

People from neighbouring villages would be trained to work in the resort, providing them with employment, twenty-first-century skills and wealth. They would consequently abandon unsustainable practices such as cyanide and dynamite fishing, and have a vested interest in keeping trawlers and long-line fishing boats out of surrounding waters. The ocean would thrive and healthy reefs and plentiful fish stocks would keep happy divers coming, so the resort owners and local people would thrive too.

## Compromises

Inevitably, those who pursue this dream are

*Scuba Confidential:*

# No Dive Centre is an Island

*— Involving the Local Community*

confronted by difficult decisions that force them to weigh their good intentions against business interests.

Some of these decisions involve environmental considerations. For example, do you have to provide guests with packaged food and drinks such as pot noodles, cookies, beers and sodas, despite the trash issues these create? Or can you still attract customers if you only offer locally sourced food and fruit juices? Given limited fresh-water supplies, do you need to provide a shower and toilet in each room or would the guests object to having to share bathroom facilities?

But the most crucial decisions involve people. For instance, it takes time to train

rural villagers who possess limited language and hospitality industry skills to become capable managers and dive leaders, so you have to make a decision. Either wait until the villagers are ready or import your key staff from elsewhere instead.

The easiest and fastest solution is to import. You want to start recovering the costs of setting up the resort as quickly as possible and you rationalise the decision by telling yourself that, over time, you will train local people

to replace the imported staff. However, it is unusual to find a dive operation where the senior personnel are actually local. This means that, with the exception of a few low-level workers, the community as a whole does not end up sharing the interests of the dive operation.

No dive centre is an island and failing to involve the wider community closely and completely can have adverse ramifications for you, your business and the marine environ-

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ment. That part of the dream that involved local people doing things like conspiring with you to ensure thriving reefs is lost.

Here are a few stories that clearly illustrate the problem. All come from Indonesia because this is the region I know best, but the issues are international and similar tales are told worldwide wherever people dive and there are still fish in the sea.

## Gone tomorrow

A few years ago, a luxury coastal resort in Indonesia decided to tether a small platform to the seabed 20km offshore to act as a fish aggregation device (FAD) for a deep-sea sport fishing operation that they were running. The FAD was wildly successful and the guests would catch prize sport fish such as sailfish and wahoo out there. The FAD also attracted a lot of sharks and became an exciting place for both freedivers and scuba divers to visit.

The resort was very proud of the success of the FAD, which had enhanced the guest

experience, created a sustainable fish stock enabling the resort to become self-sufficient in seafood, provided employment for more local boat drivers and guides, and embellished their ecotourism credentials. So, brochures and press releases were produced and social media made sure the news travelled as widely as possible.

One day, a fishing boat was seen on the horizon as the hotel's dive boat was head-

ing back to base. The next day, the sharks were gone. In just one night, the long-liner had managed to scoop up every single one. The number of big fish around the FAD also plummeted over the coming months.

A similar episode recently took place in the north of Bali when a local dive centre found an enormous school of barracuda circling at the end of a point that juts out invitingly into the Lombok Straits. That evening, the dive centre owner posted pictures on his Facebook page and held court in a local bar, soliciting divers to join him the following morning to go back to the

same site.

He was successful, in one respect, as he managed to get quite a large group together for the dive trip. However, other people had been listening to him the previous night. The next day, as the divers, crammed into minibuses, were on their way to the beach to board the boats, they passed a fleet of pickup trucks going in the other direction, laden to the brim with dead barracuda.

## Creatures great and small

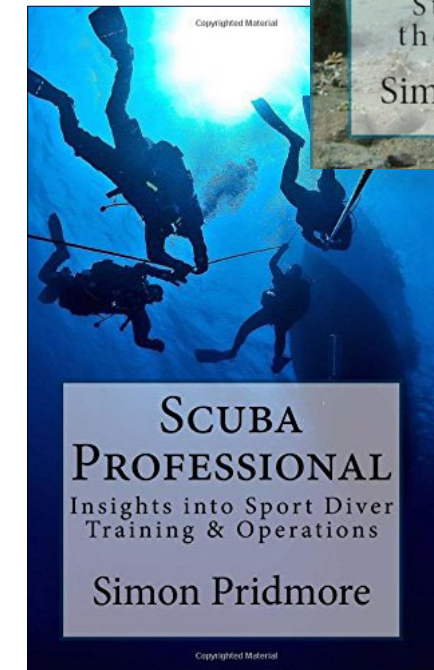
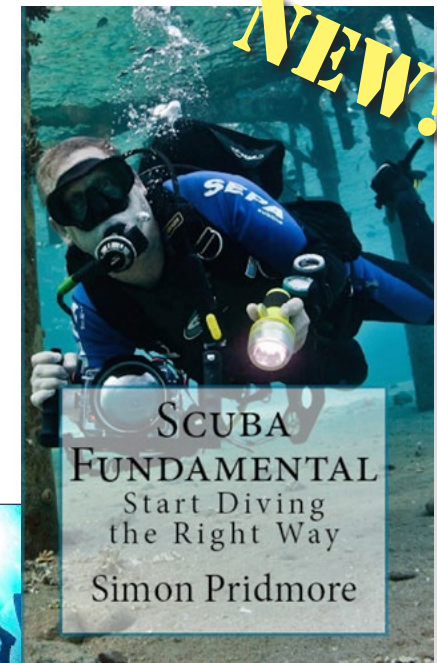
It is not only large animals that are affected. Along Bali's northern shore, far away from

the tourist hot spots, there are a few sheltered bays where tiny, rare creatures hide. One of these is called Puri Jati. The villagers here are very poor. They do not share in the tourism wealth of the island's south.

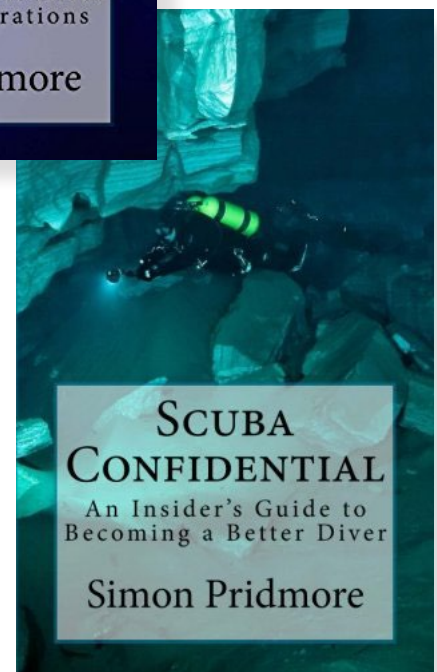
Encouraged and assisted by a philanthropic Bali dive centre, a local family set up a small shaded facility on the beach with freshwater showers, toilets, concrete rinse tanks for gear and cameras, and a snack shop. Dive instructors and guides who bring divers here pay a fee for using the facility. The whole setup is a great example of ecotourism at its best: local people and

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professional divers working together for mutual gain and in the interests of both tourists and the marine environment.

Sadly, from time to time, other people along this stretch of coast, who do not share in the fees paid by the scuba divers, sneak in at night and drag weighted nets along the seabed. Perhaps, they have heard reports of divers coming out of the water with smiles on their faces, and assume the bay is full of fish. It is not. All they dredge up are small octopi and tiny creatures like frogfish, pipefish and rare, exotic types of scorpion fish: hidden treasures for divers but no use at all for feeding hungry families. The day after the nets have passed, the sand that was previously literally crawling with life is a desert.

### Unintended consequences

In all three of these cases, far from protecting the marine life, the scuba diving activity had the exact opposite effect and resulted in its destruction. The primary causes were lack of information, education and commu-

nication. The dive operations did not have the local coastal communities on board or on their side. They had failed to recruit community leaders to their cause, leaders who could explain how dive tourism could benefit everyone in the area. Of course, this was a role that local members of staff at a senior level could perform: if they had some.

The dive operations had not garnered sufficient local support or sufficiently involved the community financially, intellectually or emotionally in what they were doing. Therefore, self-interested members of the community had no qualms about sabotaging their efforts. They might not even realise that what they were doing is sabotage. They might simply be acting opportunistically.

An oft-quoted statistic is that a shark is worth US\$100 (for meat and fins) dead but US\$1,000,000 (in tour-

ism dollars) alive. For a fisherman, this is not a convincing argument for not killing a shark, if the US\$100 will feed his family for months and if he receives not one cent of the value of the shark if he allows it to live.

### Education and communication

As a dive professional or marine eco-entrepreneur, campaigning on behalf of fish and reefs in blogs and on websites directed at divers may bring you customers but you are preaching to the converted. There are other groups of people living closer to the problem who can do much more with the message you are delivering. By involving coastal communities and local authorities, you can change behaviours that are harmful to the future of scuba diving tourism.

Resort and dive centre owners must spread the word into the wider world beyond the dive community by

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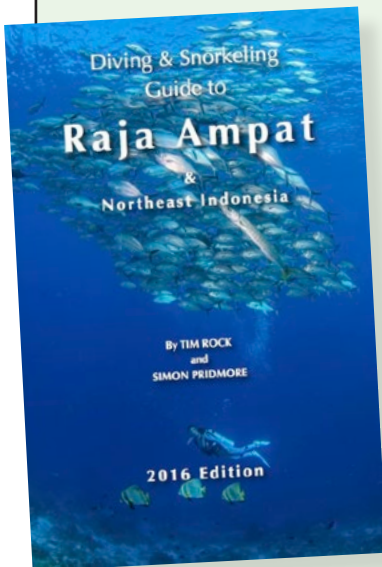


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involving more local people in their dive operation: training managers, taking on more local guides, converting local divemasters into dive instructors, even taking local people underwater on try-dives. They need to get the local authorities interested—to make the effort to know the leaders and opinion-formers and talk to them. All this will build support links to coastal communities and engender mutual trust. Their interests and the resorts' interests can coincide. They just have to be shown how.

### More than a beach clean-up

To end with a shining example of what can be achieved: In northeastern Bali, a recent beach clean-up programme was introduced under the Trash Hero banner. The usual suspects showed up: dive instructors and their students, local divers, hotel staff and other environmentally concerned residents. But the folks



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running the programme wanted to broaden their reach and encouraged local schoolchildren to participate, initially with the promise of ice-cream afterwards. In casual conversation during the clean-up sessions, the children learnt to differentiate bad trash (plastics, cans, bottles, etc.) from good trash, such as leaves, logs and weeds. They also came to understand why there was a difference and what made some trash “good” and other trash “bad.”

After a while, the children became the most enthusiastic cleaner-uppers of all and there was no longer any need to bribe them with ice-cream to per-

suade them to show up. Now, under pressure from students, a local school has started its own trash clean-up along neighbouring streets. Small steps: sometimes, that's all it takes. □

*Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers, Scuba Confidential—An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver, Scuba Professional—Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations and Scuba Fundamental—Start Diving the Right Way. He is also the co-author of Diving and Snorkeling guides to Bali and Raja Ampat and Northeast Indonesia. This article is adapted from a chapter in Scuba Professional.*

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