Wakatobi

by Wade Hughes

Wakatobi: it's not an eco-resort

It was raining heavily. That vertical torrential tropical rain, with warm drops the size of glass marbles. We were in a parade. Four or five cars and small SUVs, traveling in stately line down the village road on Wangi-Wangi. We'd landed minutes before on the Wakatobi private airstrip, and were being ferried down to the port for boat transfers to the resort, or to its dive yacht, Pelagian. Close in, on both sides of the road, distorted and blurred by the rivulets of water sluicing across the windows, we could see the rows of neat, and not so neat, cinder block homes. A few of the residents sat deep in the shelter of their verandahs and watched us pass.

I didn't see any For Sale signs, and an internet search after we'd returned home only offered properties in Wangi Wangi in Australia. But I did find one "Tidy single family home" for sale in Southern Sulawesi for about seventy million Indonesian Rupiah –or about €5000. Back in our informal little motorcade, there were at least a dozen underwater camera systems, paid for with discretionary disposable income, each costing more than that.

Discretionary disposable income is critical for the success of the Wakatobi venture. The fish and marine creatures in the area depend on it. But so do the local people.

We based ourselves at the resort and so, in many instances over three weeks, dived offshore from numerous local villages, frequently close enough to hear the melodic calls to prayer lilting across the water from the local mosques.

Until the Wakatobi resort took



The other side of the coin
For guests, life on Wakatobi island moves at a more leisurely pace. It is strongly connected though with the day to day realities of life in the village and the reefs. Leica M9P. Summicron 28mm ASPH f2. 500/11. ISO80.



Turtle, remora, and barnacle
Common on Wakatobi reefs, hawksbill turtles can seem almost indifferent to human intruders. One swam so close it grazed my shoulder. This one cruised past on the house reef carrying three freeloaders.
Canon 5D3 Nauticam. Canon EF 100mm F2.8 L IS USM Macro, 100/ f5.6 ISO 200. Manual exposure.





The Village - The value of beauty: Photographs by Robyn Hughes; Canon EOS7D, Canon 18-135. 500/f11. ISO 400.
It's a village like many thousands of others. Remote and isolated, dependent on local natural resources for almost everything from building materials to food, unable to easily share in the benefits of education, health, and opportunity that can be found in the more developed world. It's a stark reminder that while aspiration and opportunity might be universally distributed, opportunity it not. Yet the people in villages such as these are often the unpaid custodians of eco-systems that have great value in the natural scheme of things. Sustainable management of such eco-systems is often a challenge and one not always overcome; people must eat, and they must feed their kids. At Wakatobi, clear-eyed economic management is connecting this custodianship with a market that is willing to pay for it. It takes time, aspects of life can still be tough, but the interconnection between those who live here, and those who come to observe, is creating a circle of goodness that, in the end, benefits everyone

shape, and became a conduit for well-heeled international divers to visit and revel in their splendour, the reefs we visited were the natural fishing grounds for the local villagers. Outrigger canoes still go out to fish. Patches of the reefs still bear the scars of dynamite fishing.

But today, the reefs are being harvested differently. They are approaching sustainable exploitation, simply because their economic value has been amplified, and more equitably distributed. The Wakatobi model is quite simple. It's the same, in principle, to the game parks in Africa. It reflects some of the characteristics of successful degraded farm-land recovery programs in the US and Australia. And, of course, it is similar in many respects to a number of other marine park based resorts.

What makes this model successful is that economics, not conservation, heads the agenda. Improvement of the economic and social well being of the people who depend on the reefs for their livelihoods is the principal objective. Conservation of the reefs and the biodiversity they harbor and support flows as a natural outcome of the focus on economics.

The economic engine, of course, is the revenue delivered by the incoming guests of Wakatobi resort.



A signal blenny puts out his silent but highly visible call for companionship. (Silent to human ears, that is. To other blennies,...who knows...?) Canon 5D3 Nauticam. Canon EF 100mm F2.8 L IS USM Macro 100/f16. ISO 200. Inon strobes. Manual exposure.



Anything but lady-like, two demoiselles go lip to lip to assert ascendancy. Canon 5D3 Nauticam. Canon EF 100mm F2.8 L IS USM Macro 100/f13 ISO 200. Inon strobes. Manual exposure.

Guests pay the resort, the resort pays for local goods, services, and jobs, invests in substantial education and training programs, pays for electricity and maintenance for the village on the resort island. In return, the locals protect the reef, learn and adopt sustainable fishing practices. From all this, the resort turns a profit, new opportunities and choices open up for local villagers and their kids, pressure comes off the reefs, natural abundance returns, and attracts the next batch of guests who want to dive in Eden. And so it goes. The openness of the local population to embrace new ideas, Wakatobi's foresight management skills, and the discretionary disposable income earned in a thousand vocations round the globe, all connect here.

It does require significant portions of those incomes to gain entry into this circle of mutual benefits. Wakatobi offers high levels of comfort and service,as well as supporting the various educational and social programs required to maintain its business model, so its not inexpensive. This perhaps serves as an indicator of the true value of natural resources and the real costs of conserving them.

But, spend one afternoon with the people and kids of the local village. Take one dive on a deeply undercut wall, draped with soft corals, sea fans, massive, sagging ancient sponges, and alive with hosts of fish. Do that, and it becomes clear. Wakatobi is not an eco-resort. It's far more than that.

Wade Hughes