

THE VIRTUOUS TRAVELLER

Leading a responsible life aquatic

THE GLOBE AND MAIL –NOVEMBER 19TH, 2005

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To get to El Nido, an island in the Philippines, first you board a battered bus that bumps and bounces over washboard roads. Then you're herded onto an outrigger boat -- an oversized canoe with a motor -- for a five-hour trip on open ocean.

But, to Jeff Garrett, a scuba enthusiast, it's worth it. Garrett, who has dived on Australia's Great Barrier Reef and off Cozumel, Mexico says El Nido is the best diving he has experienced.

But some wonder how long it will last. "The reefs we dove were spectacular," he recalls. But he was appalled at the obvious destruction of the reefs from the common fishing practice of dynamiting. While the Philippines has reportedly been cleaning up its act -- and its reefs -- in the past decade, it's not the only country whose coral has taken a beating. About 70 per cent of the world's reefs have been wrecked or are at risk, according to the Status of Coral Reefs of the World 2004, an international survey released at a United Nations environmental conference last December.

While the vast majority of coral-reef destruction is caused by poor water quality and increasing water temperatures from global climate change, human activities, including scuba diving, are not without blame. According to the Barbados Ministry of the Environment, Energy and Natural Resources, divers "are guilty of toppling and trampling corals" as well as pocketing them for souvenirs. It also reports that dive boats drop and drag anchors that further damage the reefs.

But Steve Broadbelt, owner of Ocean Frontiers, a dive operation in the Cayman Islands, says most dive operators are eco-minded: "The staff who operate the dive boats are often not in the business for the money, but more for the opportunity to surround themselves in the environment that they love."

Even those who aren't so passionate about the environment recognize that they need to protect the ocean's natural resources in order to protect their business, he says.

He admits, though, that divers do contribute to the overall load on coral reefs, adding that responsible divers and dive operators should do their part to minimize impact.

Ann Vanderhoof agrees. The author of the travel memoir *An Embarrassment of Mangoes*, based on two years she and her husband spent cruising the Caribbean, recalls the incredible diving off Bonaire, which declared its waters an official marine park in 1979. The World Conservation Union recently released a report on the state of the

world's coral reefs in late October, noting that, as Bonaire has discovered, marine parks reduce stress on coral-reef eco-systems by lessening the effects of pollution and overfishing.

As well, Vanderhoof says, "dive sites [off Bonaire] were rotated. Some of them were periodically closed off so they didn't have too much diver traffic and flora and fauna didn't become too stressed." She notes that not only was this good for the aquatic environment, it was good for business. "It preserves tourism by keeping the island as a great dive destination."

Her husband, Steve Manley, says that sensitive dive operators keep diver traffic down. "Some run 'cattle boats' that put a lot of divers into the water," which Manley says isn't necessarily bad, but it's harder to monitor divers when there are a lot of them.

He says warning signs of irresponsible diving operations include photos of fish feeding ("a big no-no," he says) and gloves given to divers. Diving gloves are banned in the Cayman Islands, says Steve Broadbelt, as they encourage touching when divers should be keeping their hands to themselves.

Project Aware Foundation (<http://www.projectaware.org>) is an international organization concerned with conserving underwater environments through education, advocacy and action. It has offices around the world, including Japan, Britain, Asia and North America. Broadbelt's Ocean Frontiers Ltd. received a 2004 Environmental Achievement Award from the Project Aware Foundation.

"Eco-operators" such as Broadbelt commit to various practices that include "providing dive experiences that enhance visitor awareness," "maintaining distance from sensitive environments," "not touching or chasing animals" and "environmentally sound rubbish removal."

Broadbelt believes that dive operators have a strong responsibility to promote good behaviour. "They need to keep advocating environmentally conscious dive practices and techniques to their customers and lead by example."

The key, he insists, is education. "Divers compare reefs to terrestrial vegetation and think that if they trample over it, it will grow back quickly -- this is not the case. Many divers just are not aware of the impact they can have on a fragile reef system."

Here is a guide to scuba do's and don'ts:

Dive carefully, keeping aware of your body and equipment placement. Control your buoyancy to ensure you don't touch fragile organisms with your body or equipment.

Resist the temptation to touch, handle, feed or hitch rides on aquatic life. You can stress the animal, interrupt feeding and mating behaviour or provoke aggressive behaviour in otherwise non-aggressive species.

Do not collect underwater souvenirs -- take an underwater photo.

If you hunt and/or gather game, obey all fish and game laws. Respect the rights of other divers in the area who are not hunting.

Report any environmental disturbances or destruction. You are in a unique position to monitor the health of the underwater environment.

Be a role model to other divers.

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