

Tides of time

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In June 2009, Unesco's World Heritage Committee voted to extend the Philippines' Tubbataha Reefs marine site, increasing its area to 96,828 hectares

Chelidonura sp.: A glimpse of Tubbataha's underwater diversity.

SPOTLIGHT | Site extension in 2009

The Philippines' Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park: A World Heritage marine site triples in size

Ever since 1993, when Tubbataha was first inscribed on Unesco's World Heritage List, enthusiasts have dreamed of one day enlarging the Philippine site. That hope became reality last June, when Unesco's World Heritage Committee formally ratified the extension of the site, tripling its size.

Tubbataha is one of the nation's oldest ecosystems, its largest coral reef, first natural World Heritage site and only natural marine park. Its remote location has kept its reefs largely intact. No permanent inhabitants are allowed on them, except during fishing season, when locals can build temporary shelters. Lagoons, seagrass beds and coral islands support a significant number of marine species dependent on reef ecosystems, ensuring a constant presence of larger marine fauna such as tiger sharks, cetaceans, turtles and schools of barracuda and other pelagic fish. Together with diverse varieties of seabirds, they make Tubbataha a laboratory for the study of ecological and biological processes, including coral-reef formation. Tubbataha lies in the Sulu Sea, in what is known as the Coral Triangle, a hub of coral diversity. The park supports 374 species of coral, almost 90 percent of all types found in the Philippines.

At the time of Tubbataha's inscription in 1993, the International Union for Conservation of Nature recommended that a nearby islet with an important reef, Jessie

Beazley Reef, be included in a future extension. Five kilometers (3.1 miles) long by three kilometers wide, Beazley Reef has more soft corals than the park's other two atolls. Spotted dolphins — unseen in the old park's boundaries — abound, and the reef's crevices and caverns provide countless niches for marine life.

In 2006, the Philippine government enlarged the park to include Jessie Beazley Reef, and Tubbataha's total area jumped from 33,200 hectares (about 82,000 acres) to 96,828 hectares. At its 33rd Session in Seville last year, the Unesco World Heritage Committee voted to extend the Tubbataha World Heritage site, using the same criteria that got Tubbataha inscribed nearly 20 years ago; these include superlative natural phenomena, ecological processes, biodiversity and threatened species.

The expansion was possible thanks to a new awakening on the part of the Philippines toward preserving the environment. The country's Ambassador to France and Permanent Delegate to Unesco Rora Navarro-Tolentino says that Tubbataha has become symbolic of this new attitude. "For a long time, we didn't give much attention to the resources we have — marine resources, particularly," she says. "We haven't been con-

cerned in our efforts to protect them for future generations. But Tubbataha is an example of what the country can achieve, and what the country should do. Today, it is the pride of the nation."

The enlarged property better protects endangered species, since it provides more space, free from human disturbance, for them to roam, feed and perform their ecological functions. Illegal fishers had been using the sandbar in Beazley Reef as a rest station before entering the park clandestinely at night. "With the expansion, we can arrest them there, which was impossible before," explains Angelique Songco, Tubbataha's site manager. Visitors understand the benefits of increased conservation efforts going on in the widened park, too. Adds Songco, "Tourists are witnesses of how the protected Tubbataha atolls have continued to flourish, while the Jessie Beazley Reef, only 13 nautical miles away but unprotected, sank into degradation." The park's reef systems are intimately connected, and leaving Beazley Reef vulnerable would have meant losing advantages from conserving the rest of the Tubbataha site.

Songco calls the Tubbataha extension a double-edged sword. While it has increased the impact of the conservation campaign, it has brought more challenges

in enforcing protection laws, both financially and logistically. Vast stretches of ocean already made Tubbataha difficult to patrol. "Now we have to work even harder and spend more money to cover a larger area," she notes. "Fortunately, our Tubbataha Protected Area Management Board realizes this is the price we must pay."

Preserving Tubbataha, however, is not a single effort on the part of any lone group of directors; the entire country must commit to fighting the threats the park faces. Tubbataha may be the pride of the nation, but it is also a national challenge. And here is where the new commitment comes in. Something has changed in the national mind-set, and government (from the local to the provincial and the national level), the private sector and the citizenry are all involved. "They know we have to manage our resources holistically, or it won't work," says Navarro-Tolentino, who participated in the extension project. Such an integrated, cooperative approach was not possible before, she adds: "Our people know we can't do things like we used to anymore. And this knowledge is thanks to Unesco. Unesco is wonderful in motivating our people to be conscious of our responsibility of having Tubbataha as a World Heritage site. When awareness is elevated, there's a higher commitment from the population. To accomplish this nationwide is a wonderful objective for us for the future."

Unesco's Marine Program

The World Heritage Marine Program was launched in 2005 by Unesco's World Heritage Committee, and set three goals to help save our marine heritage. The first was to add more marine sites to the World Heritage List. Of the nearly 900 World Heritage sites, only 41 are inscribed for marine values. Another goal is capacity-building. Unesco wants to help site managers better protect the values of their sites, and does this by having them share their expertise and experience. Later this year, Unesco will bring all marine site managers together for the first time. The final goal is communications: raising perceptions of the world's marine heritage to better engage the public and the worldwide ocean community. This is carried out, in part, through the Tides of Time program. For more information, visit <http://whc.unesco.org> JJ.

Swiss watchmaker's auctions benefit World Heritage sites

In February last year, Jaeger-LeCoultre held an online auction of the prototype of the Master Compressor Extreme W-Alarm Tides of Time model, specially created for the Tides of Time series — a partnership among Jaeger-LeCoultre, Unesco's World Heritage Centre and the International Herald Tribune. The event raised £13,540 (\$20,700), which the Swiss luxury watchmaker donated to the Tubbataha Reefs Marine Park, a World Heritage site in the Philippines. The auction paid for a sorely needed radar and solar-panel system that help keep poachers out of a no-fishing zone.

The Swiss manufacture repeated the initiative this spring with another auction to benefit a World Heritage property. Going under the hammer was a vintage 1958 Geophysic Chronometer that was part of an extraordinary expedition. The watch was worn by climbers who scaled a virgin Himalayan peak — Mont

Antoine LeCoultre, named after the manufacture's founder — for the first time last year. This auction raised £12,600; proceeds will go to the Sundarbans World Heritage site in India. "We chose India because it's linked to the history of the brand," says Yves Meylan, director of Jaeger-LeCoultre France. "The Reverso, one of our most iconic models, was born in India in 1931, for polo players there. We have strong links to India and believe we owe it something. We feel it would be nice to give something back." The Tides of Time program, in its third year, has produced some pleasant surprises. Christie's auction house selected Jaeger-LeCoultre for a "green" public sale in New York later this month. Says Jérôme Lambert, the company's chief executive: "They invited us because of our investment in this program, which has become the flagship for our efforts to preserve the environment." JJ.

EXPLORING | Diving and more

Whales, dolphins and tropical fish in one of Asia's most isolated spots

The Zodiac pulls away from the mother boat, picking up speed as it zips across the Sulu Sea. At first there's nothing but endless sky and water in blues barely distinguishable from one another. But with seabirds hovering nearby, land is somewhere close at hand. And there it is — nothing more than a dark blip on the horizon at first, but then distinguishable as a tiny island with a crown of dark-green vegetation.

South Atoll is its official name, but locals also call it Lighthouse Island because of the old whitewashed navigation tower, a rare manmade object in what is otherwise a place with almost no human footprint — the Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, a Unesco World Heritage marine site in the Philippines.

Carefully scouting the water between his boat and the island, the Zodiac driver spots a break in the reef, revs the engine to life and shoots the rubber boat into the lagoon. All at once, the water beneath the boat changes color and quality, translucent enough to show why people travel from the other side of the globe to visit one of the most isolated spots in all of Asia — thousands of tropical fish and an even greater

profusion of other sea creatures in an environment as extraordinary as the Great Barrier Reef and other underwater icons.

"Nearly all the diving is wall reefs, so the drop-offs are long, allowing for the sighting of many different species of fish and corals," says Dino Pangjone of Sakura Charters, a local company that runs live-aboard diving boats to the park. "The open ocean currents flowing through allow for large schools of fish — jack, tuna and barracuda — as well as large pelagic [species] and whale sharks."

Yvette Lee of Hans Christian Andersen Cruises, another local scuba and snorkel operator, says that "guaranteed shark presence" is another huge draw. Tubbataha is thought to have the world's largest concen-

tration of white-tipped reef sharks, one of a dozen species found in park waters. In addition to the more placid varieties — who tend to be curious but wary of humans — Tubbataha also harbors more dangerous species, like the potentially deadly hammerhead and tiger sharks.

The recently expanded park comprises a 96,828-hectare (240,000-acre) triangle in the middle of the Sulu Sea. An island anchors each corner: South Atoll, North Atoll and the recently added Jessie Beazley Reef. A marine version of the rain forest, the area boasts stunning biodiversity: 374 coral species, 479 different kinds of fish and around 100 types of bird (including the very rare Christmas Island frigate). While the coral reefs and 100-meter (330-foot) walls

around the islands are the main attraction, the new open ocean areas — with water up to 2,000 meters deep — are where visitors are more likely to see whales, manta rays, dolphins and other large pelagics.

Most of the Tubbataha safari boats are based at Puerto Princesa, Palawan. Given that it takes about 10 hours to reach the park from Puerto Princesa, weeklong trips are the norm, most of them fully inclusive of meals and dives. The more ambitious trips include scuba/snorkel stops around all three islands and as many as five separate dives per day. The season to visit Tubbataha is March to June, when both the weather and the Sulu Sea are at their calmest. Blue skies prevail and underwater visibility ranges from 30 to 45 meters. J.R.Y.

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Visit the Tides of Time Web site for videos, interviews and more information on World Heritage marine sites: whc.unesco.org/tidesoftime/




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