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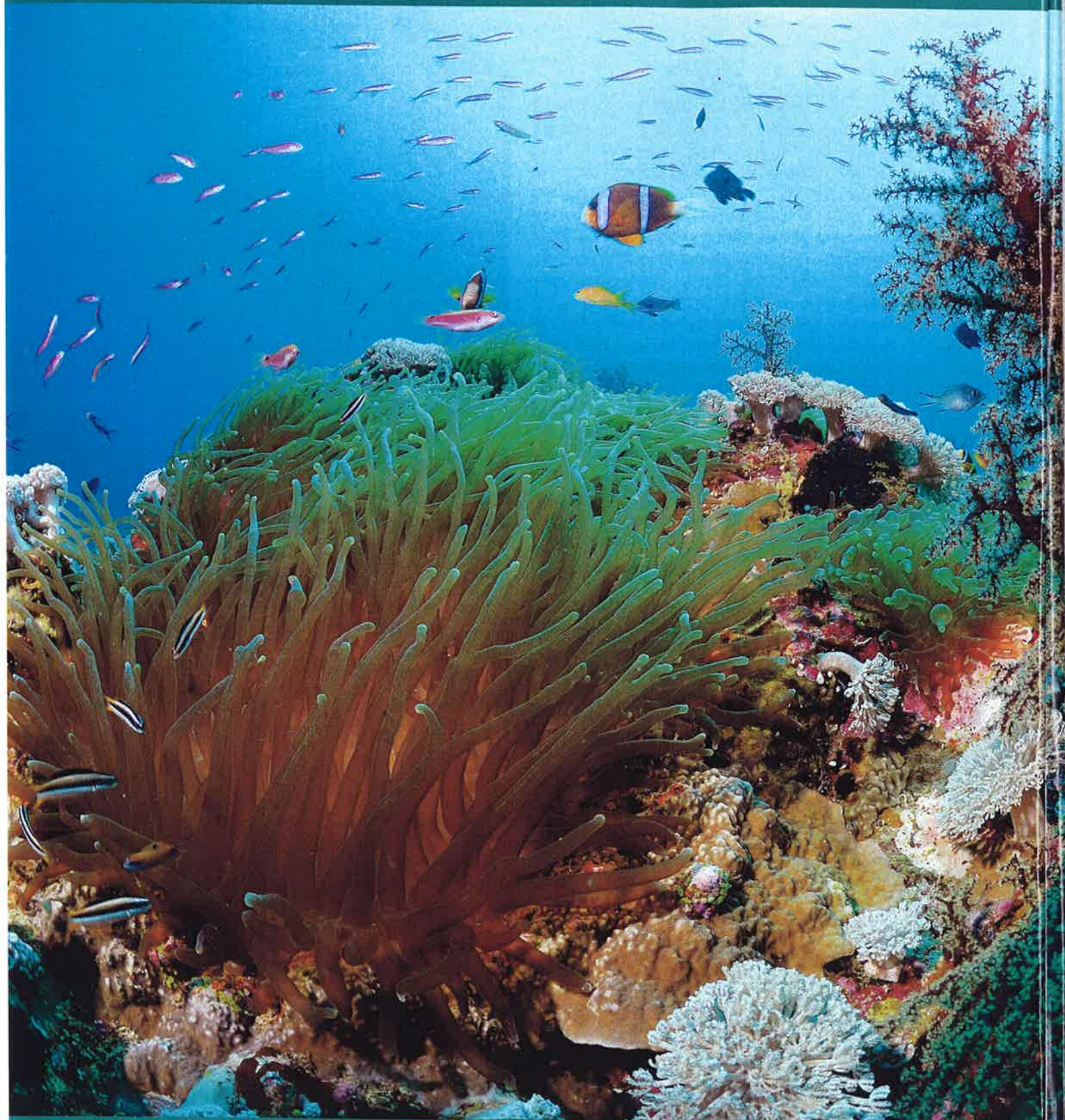


Shelling Out

Currency from the Sea

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Ocean Doom = Tour



Sm Boom

■ An uninhabited bommie in remote northeastern Australia reveals pristine marine wilderness, likely unseen by human eyes until recently. Here, soft and hard corals compete with anemones, sponges and much more for space. Wherever you look, there's a profusion of life. Distance, perhaps more than government decree, so far is the guardian of such virgin sites, accessible only by liveaboard charter boats that travel days to reach them. See stories this issue.

Photo: © Justin Gilligan - gilliganjustin@hotmail.com

Knowingly or otherwise, are scuba enthusiasts contributing to the loss of pristine marine environments by diving them so that they become the next overcrowded, under-protected reef?

Text by Peter Meyer
Photography by Justin Gilligan

A disturbing trend in travel today, often called the 'Tourism of Doom' or 'Doom Tourism,' refers to an increasing number of people taking vacations to exotic places and environments that, seemingly, are doomed to destruction.

It used to be that the more adventurous travelers targeted these destinations simply to appreciate their unique, typically remote, natural environments. Now, many travelers freely admit they're carefully choosing such places to experience untrammelled environment before they're overrun and, inevitably, "get worse".

How Pristine...Really?

How about one last visit to the Galapagos Islands before tourism and illegal fishing destroy them? Wait a moment. Aren't the Galapagos Islands one of the most remote, protected areas left in the world? That's what I thought until I learned the real scoop from recently returned diver friends. Seems the truth is far from what most perceive. According to one news source, the population in the Galapagos has jumped more than 50 per cent in the last few years and construction is booming. As with so many other special destinations around the world, conservation there, evidently, is a very low priority for most locals who are just trying to survive. And since most of them make their living in the tourist industry, the more visitors the worse the problem becomes.

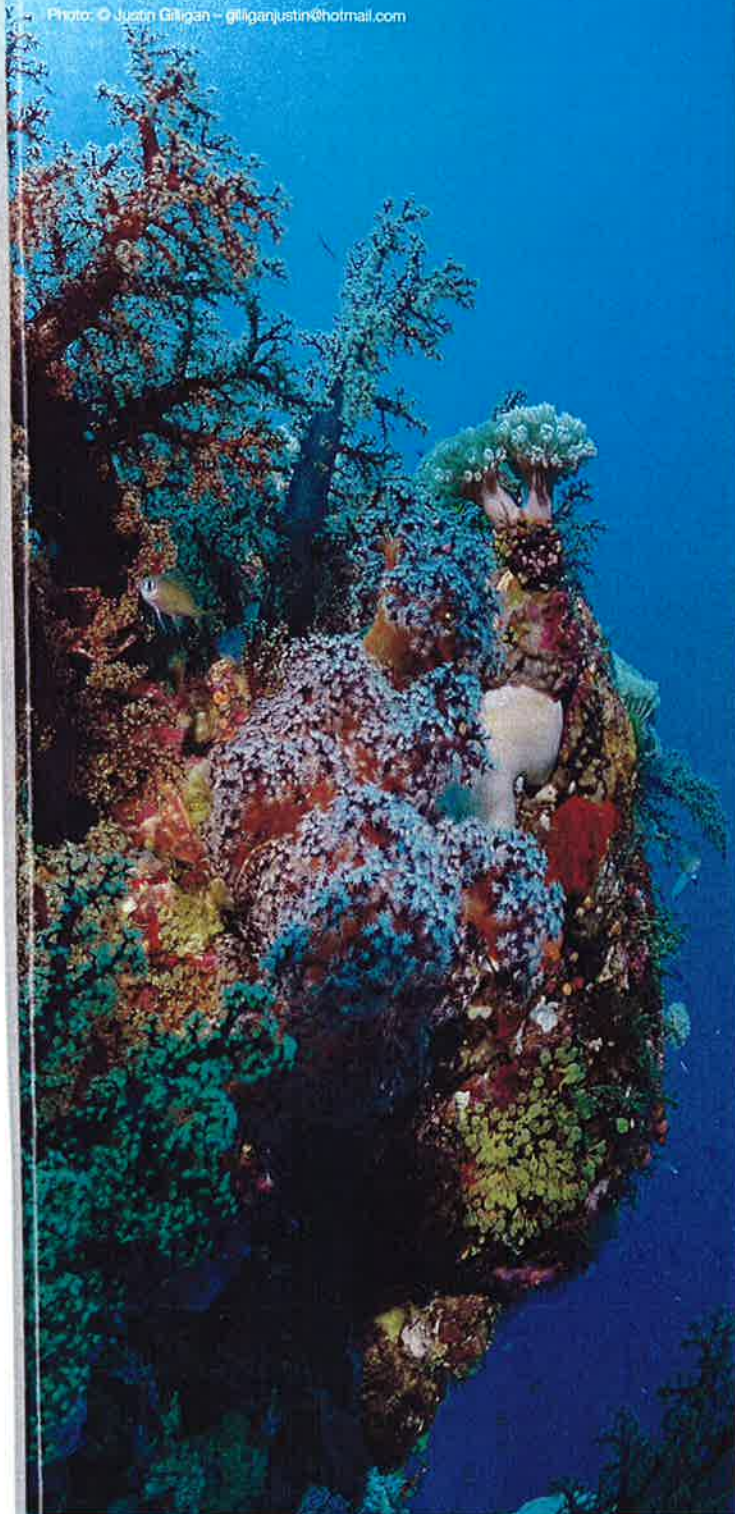
Does that sound like a protected wilderness to you? Conflict is inevitable when people consciously plan vacations "to explore unique environments before they disappear", and then by visiting them contribute to the decline of that particular natural setting. Been to Hawaii lately? While many people argue development is good in many ways (stronger economy, jobs, etc.), there's no doubt that undeveloped, pristine areas morph into commercial "tourist" destinations as they become more popular.

The following statement issued in April 2007 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), pretty much summarizes the Galapagos situation:

"A UNESCO mission has confirmed serious threats to the Galápagos National Park and Marine Reserve and welcomed ambitious measures announced by the Ecuadorian authorities to preserve the site on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

The mission confirmed the threat to the outstanding value and physical integrity of this iconic World Heritage site mainly from: the growing encroachment of invasive species, increasing human immigration, uncontrolled development of tourism, and the failure of various institutions and agencies to deal with these threats.

The mission was carried out in keeping with a decision by the World Heritage Committee to take stock of the situation in the Galápagos Islands, and at the invitation of the Ecuadorian government. Held from 8 to 13 April, it was led by Tumu te Heuheu,



Chairman of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, Kishore Rao, Deputy Director of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, and Berndt von Droste of the World Conservation Union (IUCN)."

But Dive Travel Isn't Normal Tourism

My diver friends and I used to have heated discussions about the environmental appropriateness of keeping animals and fish in zoos and aquaria. Nowadays, we must consider seriously our impact as tourist divers on those same animals and fish in the wild. While many visit zoos and aquaria for their wildlife fix, now a growing number of people regularly pursue 'real life' adventures in the wild. If this trend continues the zoos and aquaria may end up the only places to experience 'wilderness.'

So, if it's getting that bad, is it any wonder more travelers are motivated to visit places like the Galapagos before they're destroyed: if we can't stop the development steamroller we should get our fix before the damage is done, the thinking goes. But is this sound? Many divers – my friends and me included – consider ourselves eco conscious but our subjective view doesn't appear to be in step with industry insiders who say we may well be doing more harm than good at home and abroad.

Collectively, divers are part of the 'real life' adventure crowd and at the very least we have above average insight with respect to the wild – above and below the water – relative to most others. I mean, we've been at it since Jacques Cousteau and Emile Gagnan modified a gas valve, in 1943, allowing us to stay underwater for prolonged periods. That said, it's also true we spend most of our 'dive' vacations out of the water and, consequently, explore more terrestrial habitat than marine; hence, we're more aware than most travelers to remote areas.

Remember the saying, "Take Nothing but Pictures, Leave Nothing but Footprints." Well, are we missing something? If we live by that creed we shouldn't need to move on continually. Recently, I was in Cabo san Lucas on my way back from a *Nautilus Explorer* trip to Mexico's Revillagigedo Archipelago, and have to say I longed for the old Cabo of 10 and more years ago. Gone are the packed dirt streets and clean air. Now they're paved roads with concrete dividers, lots of traffic and strip bars. I'm sure the locals have more jobs, but at what cost?

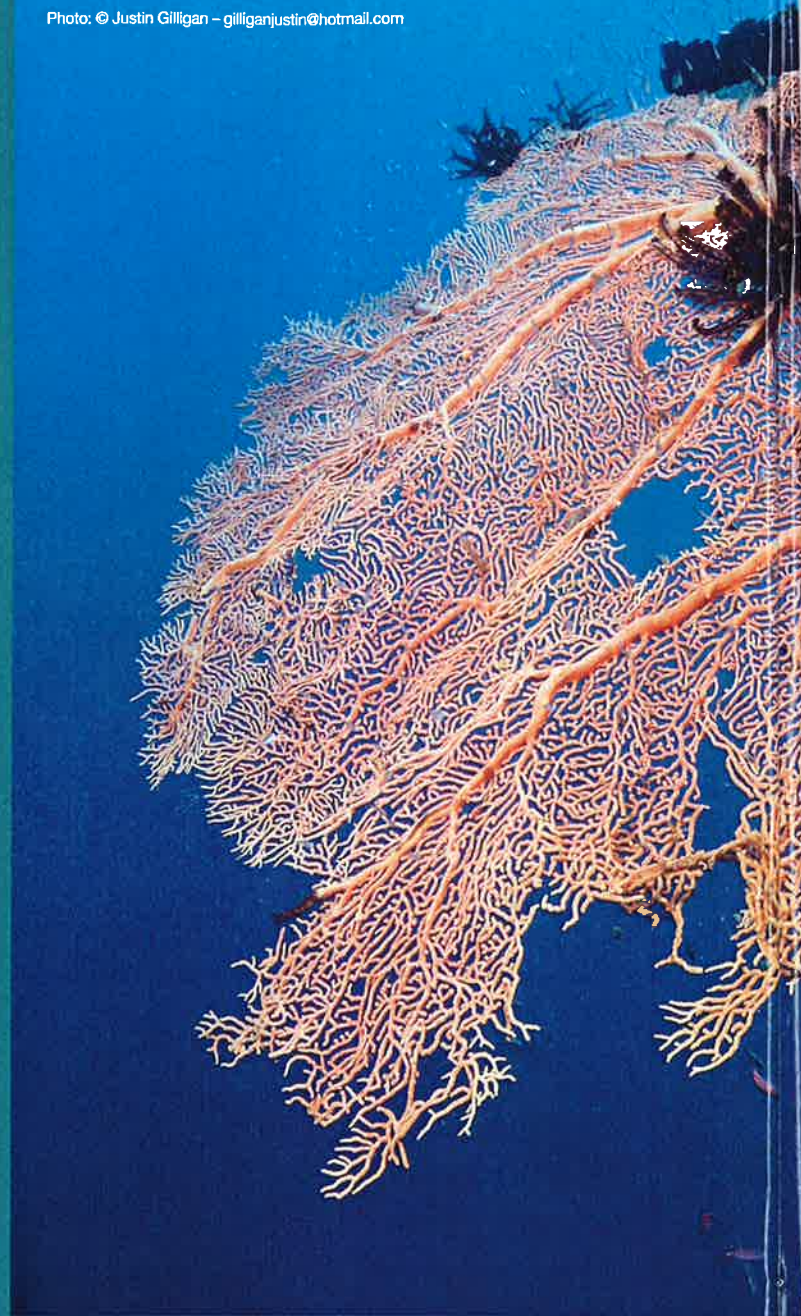
At the DEMA show last year, I noticed a new dive resort, which happened to be in Mexico, use the phrase "the way diving used to be in Cozumel" (i.e. before the tourist stampede) to advertise their new "unspoiled" destination. I thought about that and concluded that if this destination really was "unspoiled" they probably shouldn't be advertising at all. Everyone wants in on the newest, greatest, unspoiled destination before the rest of humanity spoils it, after all. Does this mean that proactively we're wearing out the good dive sites and replacing them with new ones that we'll abuse in the future? How do we move on to what's next without dooming it to destruction? Instead of advertising, shouldn't we be keeping secrets?

'Interaction' the New Thing

Another growing trend is the wildlife 'interaction' adventure. Looking doesn't seem to cut it any longer; we want to interact with those wild lions, elephants, crocodiles, sharks and mantas. Meaning, we want to feed them or otherwise influence their normal lives. This ups the potential danger stakes. Clearly, interaction

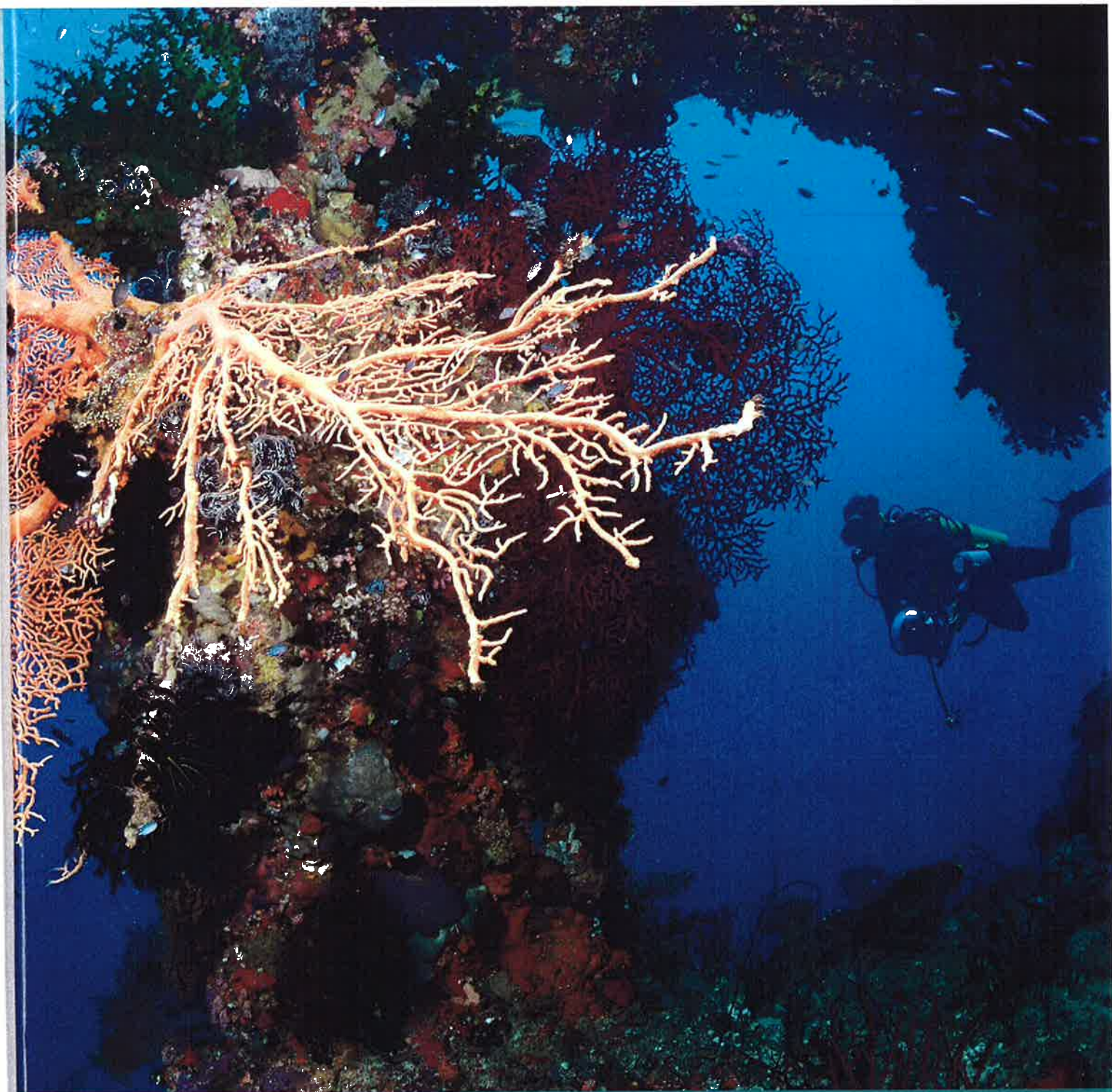
■ Clad in myriad life forms, this remote dive site at the very edge of northeastern Australia's Continental Shelf, puts a face to the name 'hotspot,' a scientific term to describe an area of extraordinarily high biodiversity. Ultimately, is tourism doom the destiny of such pristine locales? See stories this issue.

Photo: © Justin Gilligan – gilliganjustin@hotmail.com



increases risk. Remember the crocodile hunter and his stingray adventure? Maybe thrill seeking is an innate need and motivator in us all that the well-heeled tourist can satisfy; there's no question these interaction adventures cost more.

Is the concurrent growth of the population and tourism simply an unstoppable reality that will eventually turn all of our natural dive destinations into a version of Walt Disney World's Shark Reef in Typhoon Lagoon? I'm not entirely opposed to Shark Reef, you understand, or the Disney experience in general, but it doesn't work for me. I chose diving as an avocation because it's clearly an adventure in a real underwater environment. Disney's world may be pretty, and it may provide a benign environment for dive training, but it's not real – no matter what anyone says! And that



means many of us will travel to exotic locales and contribute – inevitably – to their decline. It's a quandary that allows me to see aquaria and zoos in a different light, but I digress.

Controversial Contact?

Back to wild animal interaction, and shark feeding in particular. Is this pursuit another environmental incursion that, ultimately, will have a detrimental effect on the unsuspecting king of underwater beasts? Critics of shark feeding conclude that participants – slowly but surely – are causing sharks to become dependent on divers for food, irreparably damaging their normal life patterns and of other marine life and the environment (<http://www.reefrelief.org/>). Then we have news sources citing numerous

other organizations – including Sea Sheppard, PADI and DEMA – in support of 'responsible' shark diving (see: <http://www.cdn. info/news/editorial/o000930.html>). So where do we turn for a truly objective view of these issues? Is there such a thing?

I think we have to take stock on a basic level. Does it make sense to recycle? Does it make sense to reduce our carbon emissions? Does it make sense to leave the underwater world as we found it? If so, then shark feeding makes no sense. It can influence the natural behaviour of sharks, and other underwater creatures for that matter. Seems pretty simple to me.

The notoriety of shark diving was underscored February 24 with the death of diver Marcus Groh, while diving from Jim Abernethy's vessel *Shearwater*, about five nautical miles north of Great Isaac