

Wetland Tourism: Philippines - Tubbataha Reefs



Philippines, Tubbataha Reef © Tubbataha Management Office

Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park is home to some of the most beautiful coral reefs in the world. Rising from the volcanic depths of the Sulu Sea in the western Philippines, these magnificent atolls lie at the heart of the Coral Triangle, a global centre of marine biodiversity. The Park includes 10,000 hectares of coral reef, made up of 360 species of coral – about half the world’s total. It is also home to about 600 species of fish, 12 species of sharks, 13 species of dolphins and whales, and over 100 species of birds, and it provides nesting sites for Hawksbill & Green sea turtles.

As a major source of coral and fish larvae, the Tubbataha Reefs also play a vital role in sustaining the marine resources and productivity of the greater Sulu Sea, as well as the livelihoods and food supplies that these support.

The Park was established in 1988, following a vigorous campaign by scuba divers and environmentalists, and with the endorsement of the Provincial Government of Palawan. As the Philippines’ first national marine park, it was enrolled as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993 and has been listed as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance since 1999.

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Tourism plays an important role in Tubbataha, as it provides the income needed to manage the Park and increases public awareness and support for the reefs' conservation. Visitors come from around the world to experience Tubbataha's natural beauty and incredible dive opportunities. Clear skies, flat seas, and excellent underwater visibility (30 to 45 meters) create excellent diving conditions during the dive season from March to June.

The only access to the reefs is by dive boats that are based in Puerto Princesa City, in Cagayancillo Municipality, an hour's flight from Manila, and about 90 nautical miles to the north of the reefs. The dive boats take about 10 hours to reach the Park by sea.

The Park, which lies within the Cagayancillo Municipality, is overseen by the Tubbataha Protected Area Management Board (TPAMB), which is made up of 19 members from the national and local governments and the private sector. The Tubbataha Management Office (TMO) is the TPAMB's executive arm and carries out day-to-day park administration.

The TPAMB's objective is to effectively conserve and protect the marine and terrestrial resources of the Park for the long term. Under the TRNP Management Plan 2011-2021, tourism and research are the only activities allowed within the Park: tourism activities are managed and regulated to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Park, and self-regulation by dive boat operators is encouraged.

Visitors to Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park each pay a Conservation Fee of PhP 3,000 (about USD 60), with a 50% discount for repeat visits within the season. This revenue is used to manage, maintain and improve all aspects of the work of the Park's management, from law enforcement and education campaigns to training park rangers.

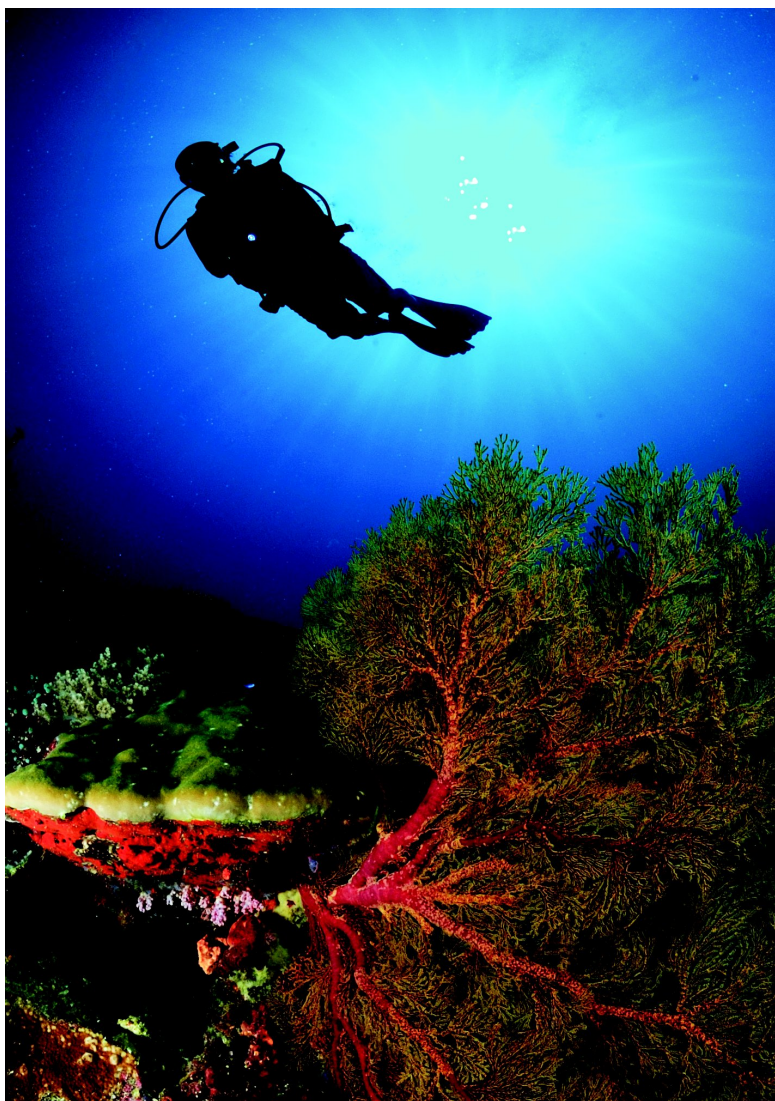
To protect the reef from damage, the Park has established regulations for diving in Tubbataha, which all dive operators and scuba divers are required to follow. The Park also provides

guidance – in the languages of the main nationalities of tourists visiting the reefs – on its website on diving best practice to minimize impacts on the reef. As part of implementation of its diving regulations, the Park is working with boat and tour operators to enhance self-regulation and ensure that at least one accredited dive master/dive guide, based in Palawan and preferably Palawēños, is present on each dive trip.

Dive boat operators in the region have also formed an association to deal with safety and crisis management issues at sea, and to streamline cooperation amongst themselves and with the Park. The Park works closely with the association and in the future will require dive operators wishing to gain access to the TRNP to become members of the association. It also runs seminars and briefings that operators and guides are required to attend annually in order to obtain a permit to enter the Park. In addition, the Department of Tourism is expected to require all dive boats operators to seek accreditation with the Philippine Commission on Sports Scuba Diving, and this will also help to ensure that all dive operators meet high standards in all areas, including reef protection.

Zoning is used in the Park to keep conflicting activities separate from each other and to protect areas that need permanent conservation. For example, scuba diving and snorkelling are not allowed in the lagoons of the North and South Atolls as these contain fragile species and habitats that are particularly sensitive to disturbance.

The Park faces several threats including illegal harvesting of protected species, illegal fishing, damage to coral during the late 1990s, an ongoing crown-of-thorns starfish infestation that was first detected in 2007, and increasing volumes of marine debris which are adversely affecting the Park's sea birds and marine life. The Park is working to manage these threats by maintaining enforcement patrols, removing crown-of-thorns starfish to keep the population under control, and undertaking regular surface water and coastal clean-ups to collect marine debris for proper disposal outside the park.



Philippines, Tubbataha Reefs © Aaron Wong 2010

An important part of the Park's strategy is its conservation awareness programme, which is focused on children, fishing communities, and the private sector and is used to generate support for conservation and stewardship of the marine environment. Similarly, its sustainable resource management programme covers biodiversity conservation and marine productivity in the Cagayancillo Municipality. Ten percent of the conservation fees paid by visitors to the Tubbataha Reefs is allocated to support livelihood initiatives in Cagayancillo, including support for local efforts to generate

revenues from tourism. The annual share of the Municipality in tourism revenues has gone to the local micro-credit facility that provides capital to seaweed farmers and other entrepreneurs. Local residents are encouraged to identify tourism products within the locality, trained in food preparation, tour guiding, etc., and provided with basic financial management skills as a means of preparing the community for tourism. The TPAMB is providing technical and other assistance to help improve the capacity of Cagayancillo Municipality to manage marine resources and local marine reserves, including through planning, enforcement

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activities against illegal fishing, and zoning of different activities including seaweed farming, fish cages, and fishing grounds. Improving marine productivity and fish catches helps raise living standards for local people and can reduce fishing pressures on the Park and other conservation sites. For example, experience in the Philippines has shown that establishment of locally-managed marine reserves can significantly increase fish catch for local communities, often within three years.

The Park also undertakes ecosystem research and monitoring, which includes comparison sites outside the Park, to improve understanding of biological resources and ecological processes in the Park, to help anticipate potential problems and serve as a basis for decision-making. The Park works closely with the Philippines Department of Tourism to market Tubbataha internationally. Recognising the importance of tourism for the Park, both for generating revenues that can be used for conservation and through the

income and employment opportunities it provides for local communities, the TPAMB is also looking at diversifying tourism within the Park.

Possibilities to open the Park and surrounding areas to other water sports, such as snorkelling, kayaking, kite boarding, or wind surfing, are also being considered: this involves a careful assessment of the impacts of such activities on the fragile reef ecosystem and surface wildlife and habitats, and the need for new guidelines for regulation of any such activities, with particular emphasis on zoning.

The Park is already encouraging more nature-focused activities, including bird watching, dolphin and whale watching, and reef observation from glass-bottomed boats. These new activities are expected to generate additional revenues for the Park and increase appreciation of the marine environment. They will also bring additional local employment opportunities, and the Park is assisting with the training of local guides to lead these activities.



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A Ramsar Case Study on Tourism and Wetlands

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