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Blast fishing competes with reef conference

Saturday, October 28, 2000

By John Ryan

A week-long, international gathering of [coral reef](#) experts that concluded Friday in Bali has done much more than generate new scientific insights and management strategies to protect the ocean environment.

The symposium has already had an inadvertent, explosive impact on coral reefs in Indonesia.

The [Ninth International Coral Reef Symposium](#) apparently played a central role in an ongoing rash of destructive dynamite fishing in [Komodo National Park](#) and the arrest of a kingpin of Bali's illegal trade in sea turtles.

The conference drew 1,500 scientists from 54 countries to discuss the condition of coral reefs, the world's richest and perhaps most threatened underwater ecosystem. Scientists released major new reports showing that 25 percent of the world's coral reefs have been destroyed, and that coral bleaching, possibly caused by global warming, has quickly become one of the worst worldwide threats to these "rain forests of the ocean."

Experts addressed the problem of destructive fishing practices such as bombs and cyanide to catch reef fish. They cited fish bombing as the most serious problem for coral reef conservation in Indonesia, home to the world's richest underwater fauna.

Meanwhile, as the conference went on, anglers across this 17,000-island archipelago set out every day in small boats with homemade bombs, fashioned from beer bottles and filled with fertilizer, kerosene and a simple fuse.

They continued their regular practice of bombing shallow water above coral reefs and scooping up the fish that float to the surface, unfazed by the fact that each bomb leaves a car-sized patch of flattened coral rubble behind.

This week, there have been about 20 explosions, enough to fill local boats with two tons of blasted fish, according to Nature Conservancy fisheries biologist Jos Pet. The bombs have ripped craters in such world-class dive sites as Tatawa Kecil and Gili Lawa Islands, home to some of the finest coral reefs in the world.

Fish bombers in the area of Komodo National Park knew all along that many environmental watchdogs, who play a central role in helping rangers and police track down the bombers, would be away all week at the coral reef symposium. They also knew that the head of the park was at a United Nations meeting in New Zealand.

"Bombers who are from inside the area and have their intelligence worked out, they take advantage of opportunities when they see them," according to Pet.



Courtesy Mark Erdmann

A scuba diver explores a reef area damaged by a blast.

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The practice is illegal, but government agencies in Indonesia, as in most of the tropics, often have too little money or desire to enforce environmental laws. In Indonesia, where blast fishing has degraded 75 percent of the archipelago's reefs, laws are most often enforced where outside organizations help rangers and police do their jobs.

In Bunaken National Park off the northern coast of the central Indonesian island of Sulawesi, scuba dive operators charge a voluntary tax of \$5 per diver to fund reef patrols.

"We are paying the police to patrol," said marine biologist Mark Erdmann, who works as an adviser to the national park and with the North Sulawesi Watersports Association. "We pay approximately \$200 to \$300 for a two-day patrol and have gotten two big busts for bomb fishing, possibly the first in Indonesia. And the local community actually supports it."

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Yet environmental problems are so volatile in this politically and economically troubled nation that years of conservation progress can be overturned in a matter of days. In Komodo National Park, where park rangers and non-governmental organizations succeeded in reducing fish bombing by 75 percent, a sudden surge of blast fishing coincided with the coral reef symposium.

The symposium provided opportunities of another kind. This month, government officials in Indonesia saw fit to use the occasion of hundreds of prominent marine biologists in Bali, the center of Indonesia's trade in sea turtles, as an opportunity to clean up the nation's environmental image.

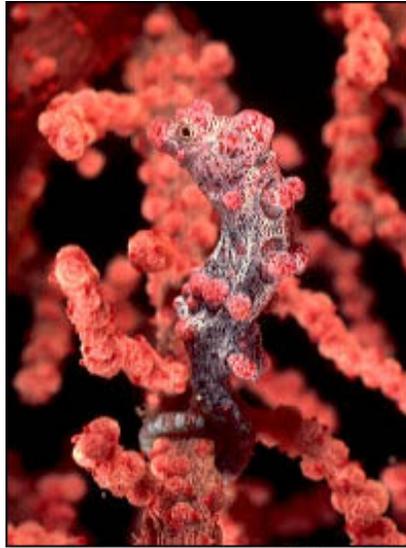
More than 10,000 green sea turtles hunted from reefs around Indonesia are traded each year in Bali. They are mostly sold for meat. In Tanjung Bena, a town just north of the symposium site, vendors actually sell sea turtle satay (shish kebabs) from street-side stands.

Earlier this month, Balinese authorities arrested Pak Wiwi, one of the island's main turtle traders. While there's no proof that this arrest, the first ever under Indonesia's 18-month-old sea turtle protection act, was directly related to the conference, "nothing happens by coincidence in Indonesia," according to marine biologist Ghislaine Llewellyn of WWF-Indonesia.

Noting local news coverage of the symposium and the presence of several top Indonesian officials, including Vice President Megawati Soekarnoputri, in attendance, Llewellyn said: "We're really hoping that bringing all this scientific brainpower here will catalyze some serious, tangible support from the Indonesian government for coral reefs."

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Indonesia's waters are known for their unique diversity of ocean life, including this pygmy seahorse photographed at Kungkungan Bay Resort in North Sulawesi.

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Blast fishing ring busted in Indonesia

Tuesday, November 7, 2000

By John Ryan

After a dramatic boat chase late Sunday through the reef-studded waters of Indonesia's [Komodo National Park](#), police and park rangers arrested 24 fishermen caught in the act of bombing coral reefs in the area.

The fish bombing bust marks the first arrest this year in the Komodo area, one of the few regions of Indonesia where fish bombing is monitored with any regularity.

Fish bombing, or "blast fishing," is a common, though illegal, practice in Indonesia, a nation of 17,000 islands surrounded by coral reefs. Many marine experts consider bombing the greatest threat to the archipelago's reefs, home to 25 percent of the world's fish species.

Despite the ban on blast fishing, such arrests are rare in Indonesia. Even where laws against such destructive fishing practices are enforced, fish bombers can quickly throw their bombs and other evidence overboard when they see police approach.

Authorities arrested the 24 fishermen, including 11 teen-age boys, near Siaba Island in the northeastern part of the national park. Police also confiscated three dilapidated wooden boats.

A fourth boatload of fishermen escaped, according to Romi Akbar of the Indonesian Forestry Police who commands the "floating ranger station" patrol. Akbar said patrollers first heard a bomb explode near Siaba Island, then saw a second bomb send a plume of foam skyward, at which point they gave chase.

After firing a series of shots into the air, the police finally detained the fishermen shortly before dusk Sunday.

The arrested fishermen hail from Papagaran, a small village inside park boundaries, and Misa and Bajo Barat, two villages near Komodo.

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Two fishermen carry 'hookah' compressor hoses used in blast fishing, evidence that will be used against them in court.

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Blast fishing is a common, though illegal, practice in Indonesia. To learn more about blast fishing and other destructive fishing practices, visit [Terrible Tackle](#).

The [Nature Conservancy's Indonesia Programme](#) contributed funds that help police monitor Komodo National Park for blast fishing.

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Blast fishing ring busted in Indonesia

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Monday morning, a truck delivered 10 of the suspects from police headquarters in the port town of Labuanbajo to the dock where the seized boats lay. The fishermen were publicly shamed as a crowd of locals and idle law enforcement officials looked on.

Stripped to the waist to identify them as prisoners, the fishermen were forced to walk on their haunches, hands behind their heads, while repeating the words "Saya melakukan bom," or "I use bombs." They then hauled evidence from their boats to the truck: three "hookah" air compressors used by the divers who gather dead fish in the wake of each explosion and thousands of limp, broken-boned fish.

Police then escorted the suspects back to the police station, where they remain in custody.

Komodo National Park has better enforcement than most marine parks after its reef patrol program took effect in 1996. Dive operators working in the area and the [Nature Conservancy's Indonesia Programme](#) contributed funds to buy a boat to bolster park patrols against fish bombing, cyanide squirting and other destructive fishing practices.

The Nature Conservancy estimates that the patrols — a joint effort between park rangers, police and the Indonesian army — have reduced fish bombing in the park by 80 percent. The conservancy and other non-governmental organizations are also working to provide economic alternatives to destructive fishing in the vicinity of the park.

Famous for its dragons, Komodo is also the site of some of Indonesia's — and the world's — richest marine habitat. The park alone is home to nearly 1,000 species of fish as well as 250 species of reef-building corals.

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By Environmental News Network staff

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Bombs away: Blast fishing evidence found in fishing boats included several plastic bottles filled with fertilizer and kerosene

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