

One thousand hours under the sea

SNORKELLING FOR UP TO SEVEN HOURS A DAY, PERTH'S PAM OSBORN HAS CHRONICLED HUNDREDS OF DIFFERENT FISH AND OTHER CREATURES THAT LIVE ON A SMALL INDONESIAN CORAL REEF.

Steve Packer





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At first glance, the online book *Wakatobi's House Reef* looks like an underwater photographer's dream assignment. In fact, it was an epic, unpaid labour of love, and putting its photos of about 400 tropical fish and invertebrate species into a book was an afterthought.

Perth couple Pam and Wayne Osborn have been going to Wakatobi Dive Resort in Indonesia once or twice a year for 11 years (except when the trip wasn't possible due to COVID-19). On a typical day, Wayne has exercised his passion in retirement for taking underwater photos from offshore dive boats – 400 scuba dives and counting. Pam has sometimes gone with him. But much more often, she has strolled to the beach and jetty with her mask, snorkel and flippers, and entered the warm, clear water over the 'house reef' – a kilometre-long strip of seagrass and coral that drops off into deeper water beyond a sea wall 100 or so metres offshore.

'At first, I'd say to my husband, "I found this and I found that," and he wasn't very interested,' she says. 'But he thought I needed a camera, so I got a waterproof Panasonic point-and-shoot. The trouble was, condensation from the warm water kept fogging the lens, and I'd have to stop swimming every hour or so to recharge the battery.'

So Pam graduated to a Canon 5DS R in a Nauticam underwater housing. She also swapped her underwater torch for a more sophisticated Inon strobe and got a weight belt

to make it easier to pursue her subjects for as long as one breath would allow. Being much less interested in wide-angle vistas than getting up close to creatures sometimes as small as a grain of rice, she has mainly used a 100mm macro lens and occasionally a 50mm macro.

As Pam has floated and flipped along behind the lens, time hasn't so much stood still as not mattered. She has been in the water for up to four hours in a session, and seven hours in a day, entranced by the richness and diversity of the sea life all around her. It has been estimated that she has spent more than 1,000 hours snorkelling alone on the reef with her camera.

'Sometimes I'm floating in water less than a couple of metres deep and sometimes I'll dive down along the sea wall, where I can also see pelagic [ocean] fish.'

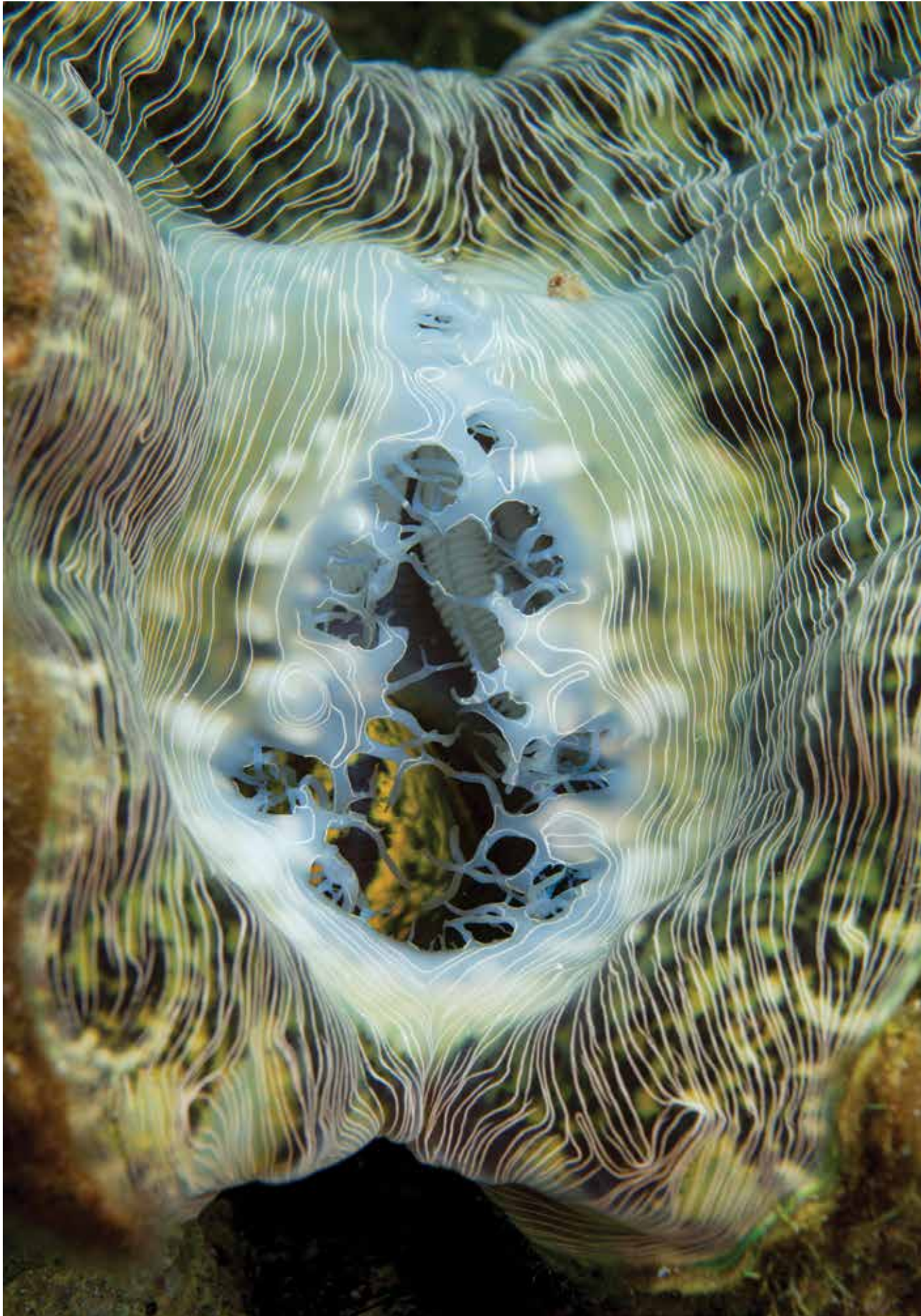
How deep does she go?

'I've never really taken any notice... maybe 13 or 14 metres,' she says. 'I've swum since I was at school and did a bit of competitive swimming at that time. The currents can get quite strong, but I don't worry about that. I know they'll take me along the reef and I often swim into them to photograph something beside me. If I'm swimming with the current, it will take me past it. Effectively, I'm trying to stay in one spot.'

'I'm looking for things all the time and get lost in what I'm doing. When I do see something, it can take a while to get it. Sometimes the fish don't do what I want and I'm thinking, "Do you realise I need to go up for a breath of air?"'

Previous: A pair of curious Yaeyama clown blennies comfortably perched on leather coral.

Left: A free swimming sea anemone comes to rest on a sea grass frond.



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Left: Intricate patterns in the mantle and siphon of a bear paw clam.

Above: With a bizarre appearance, this peacock mantis shrimp is one of the oceans' most efficient predators. They have lightning fast reflexes and the sharpest eyes on the planet. This shrimp was moving sand from its burrow.

Wakatobi Dive Resort is in the remote south-east of Indonesia's Sulawesi, on the Banda Sea. Centred in a UNESCO-designated national park, it's devoted to marine conservation and showcases the famed marine biodiversity of the region.

'The amount of fish is incredible. They're everywhere,' says Pam. 'Whole schools of them along the drop-off and lots of babies in the nursery along the reef. Lots of turtles too. I try to swim alongside them when they come up for air, and I have to be careful because when I follow them down again, they can take me deeper than I think I might be.'

There are also moray eels, snake eels, shrimps, flatworms, slugs and many different shells with animals in them. 'I know the reef very well, but every time we go back, there are new things to see. It's partly a seasonal thing. On one quite recent trip, it was a tiny algal octopus, and I was able to spend 90 minutes with a rather severe-looking beaked sea snake, tracking it to the surface and following it down again.'

She says she doesn't normally bother the venomous sea snakes and they don't bother her. 'I've always been told they can't bite you because they can't open their mouths wide enough. Mind you, Wayne is renowned for his whale photography, and when we've been up in Exmouth Gulf [in Western Australia] doing that, we've seen sea snakes with fish in their mouths.'

The Osborns donate their whale photographs to friends in Perth who are whale researchers who use them to identify individual animals and track their movements. Wayne does the book compiling and has also produced the online book 'Reef Fishes' from his diving at Wakatobi, in other parts of Indonesia and around Australia. It's important to the Osborns that anyone can look at the books free of charge. They help people identify what they see when they're doing their own diving and snorkelling, and they raise awareness of the need for marine conservation all over the world.





A pair of red-toothed triggerfish.





Opposite: Lionfish with their feathery poisonous spines are formidable ambush predators with few enemies. Hovering in mid water waiting for prey.
Left: A curious striped sweetlip.
Below: A snowflake moray eel extends from its protective cavern.



‘Some of the statistics about our human impact on our seas are quite depressing,’ says Pam in the preface to the photos in *Wakatobi’s House Reef*. ‘It’s been reported that 90% of the large fish are gone from our oceans. 30% of the fish stocks that we humans consume have collapsed. One billion people rely on fish for their main animal protein source. They are mainly from third world countries where alternative means of feeding families aren’t obvious or available. Whether such media reports are selectively sensationalised or not, there seems to be ample evidence that life for many species is not assured and there is a need for intervention.

‘That’s one of the reasons I am a strong supporter of environmentally sustainable diving operators such as the Wakatobi Dive Resort.

Prior to its establishment, the surrounding coral reefs bore a heavy level of artisanal fishing. The jobs and regional income from diving tourism have provided other options for the local communities and places a value on sustaining an ecosystem that will continue to attract divers. A small step forwards perhaps among the many needed in a very long journey ahead.’

Summing up her endless fascination with the Wakatobi reef, Pam says ‘I am a believer in the simple principle the more you look, the more you see.’ 📷

More of Pam’s Wakatobi photos, and all of Pam and Wayne Osborn’s many travel and wildlife photo books, can be seen at

🌐 www.bit.ly/pwosborn



A nembrotha nudibranch (naked gilled sea slug) crawling across a coral reef. This animal breathes through the exposed gills on its back.