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A PHOTOGRAPHIC TRIBUTE TO WEST PAPUA'S RAJA AMPAT

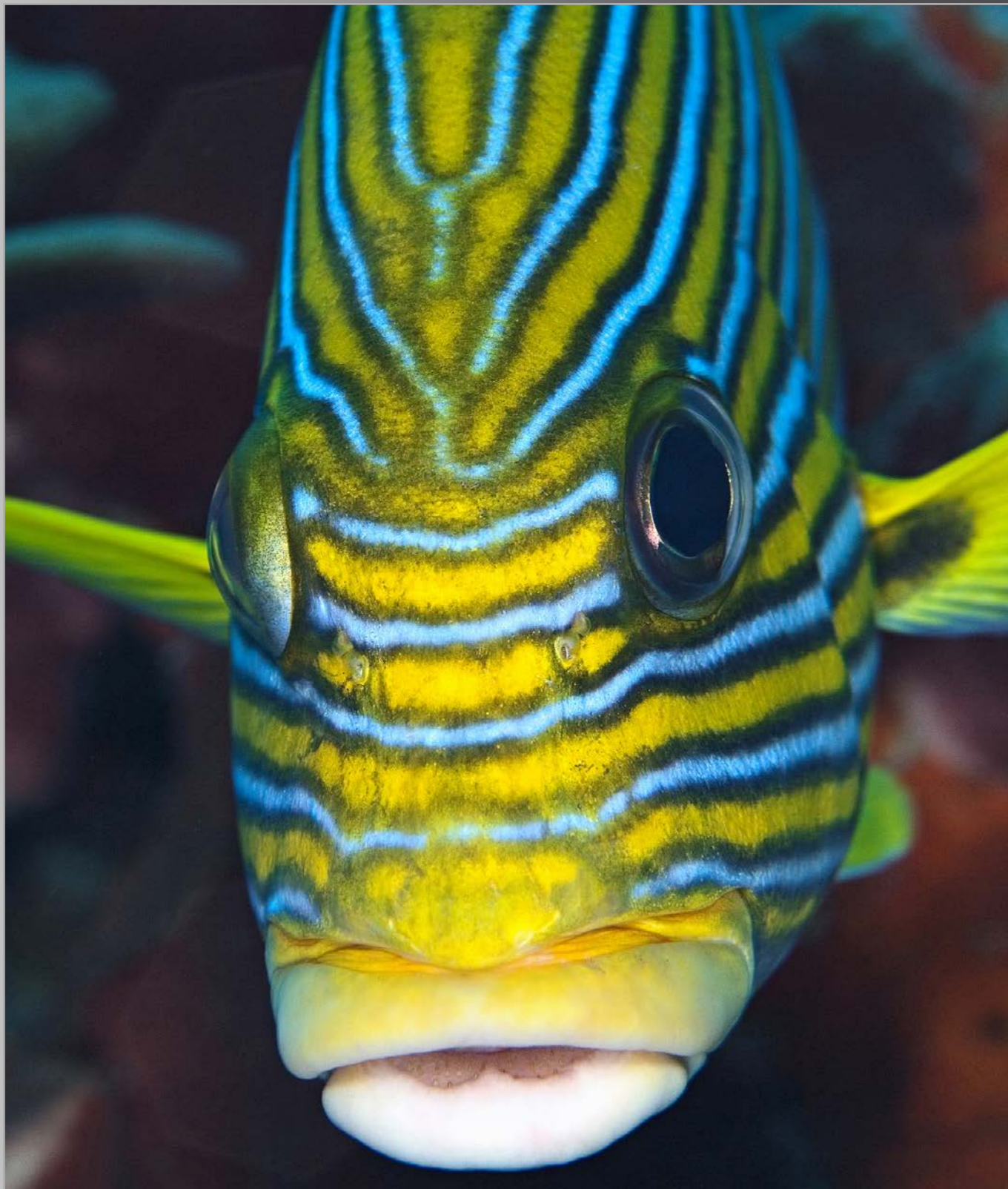
UNDERWATER KINGDOM

“The Four Kings”: a mighty Indo-Pacific archipelago with unsurpassed diving and untouched coral reefs



Between sea and land

A split image of Antonella diving on a pristine reef. In the previous page, Antonella again at Five Rocks, one the most scenic dive spots of Raja Ampat.

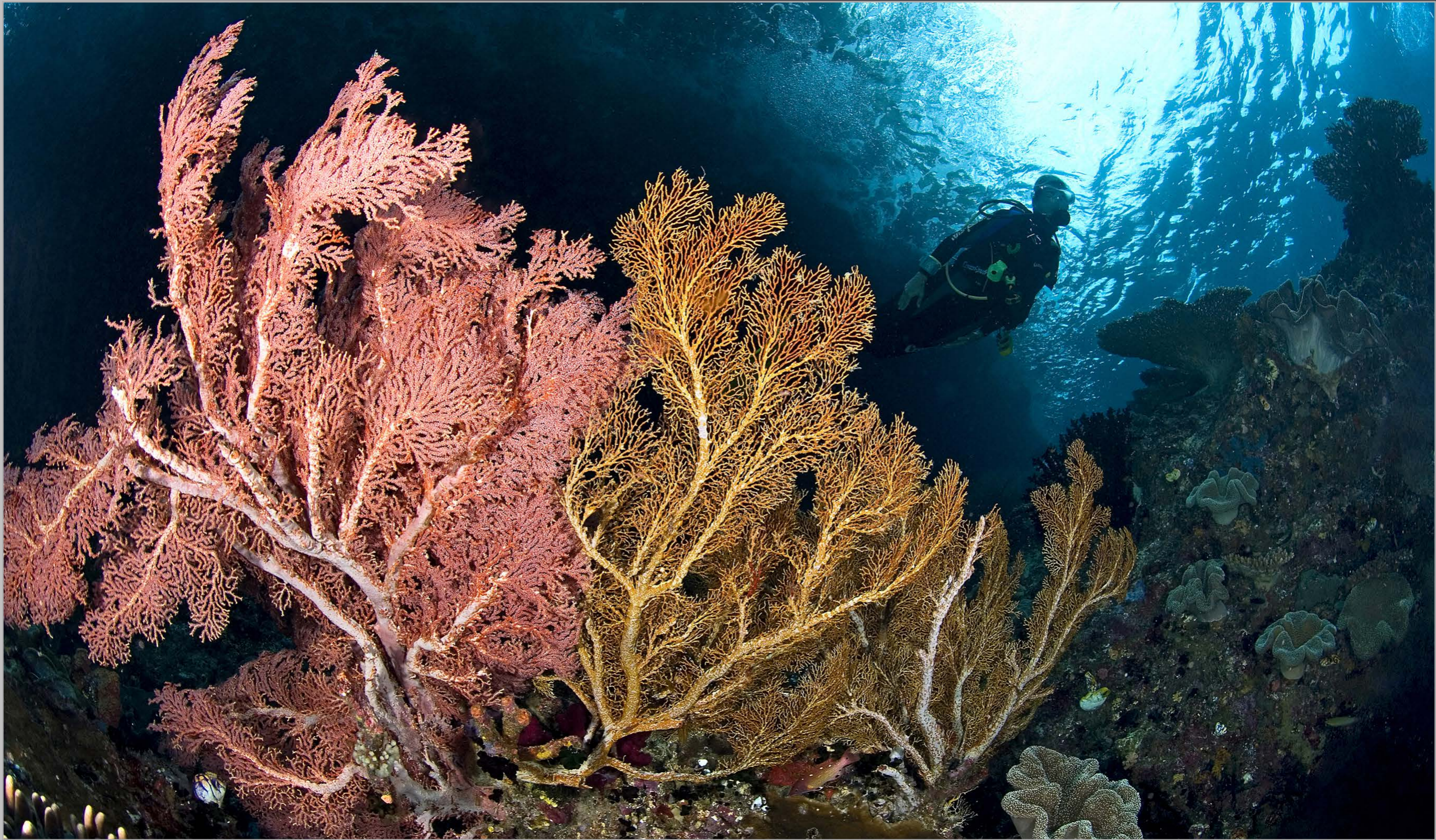


Ribbon sweetlips *Plectorhynchus polytaenia*
A common species of Raja Ampat, often seen shoaling in enormous numbers.

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The name Raja Ampat (“The Four Kings” in Bahasa Indonesia) refers to four large jungle-clad islands (Batanta, Waigeo, Misool and Salawati) which are part of a large archipelago west of the coast of the Vogelskop or Bird’s Head Peninsula in West Papua, formerly known as Irian Jaya (the half of the island of Papua New Guinea politically belonging to Indonesia today). Culturally and historically rather similar to the Maluku (or Moluccas), the islands of Raja Ampat were ruled in the 15th Century by the Sultanate of Tidore, originating from Halmahera in the Maluku, and offer today unsurpassed topside scenic beauty, crystal-clear water and an unbelievable richness of marine life. The archipelago itself comprises about 600 limestone islands and islets, the great majority of which are unpopulated and shrouded in virgin lowland forest, often with impenetrable blue-water mangrove belts surrounding them. The karst nature of the rock – covered by a remarkably thin layer of fertile soil originated by decaying organic matter – is responsible for the very dry nature of the place, with abundant seasonal rainfall disappearing almost immediately in the crevices of the rocky substrate. Fresh water is a premium, and at the same time its scarcity is a blessing in disguise – as it makes development of most islands impossible. As an exotic dive and nature travel destination, Raja Ampat has few equals – spectacular marine life (including carpet sharks, mantas, dolphins, rare flasher wrasses and four different

species of pygmy seahorses), incredibly scenic topside views, unique land wildlife, colorful, spirited and very friendly local people, and finally a good all-year round tropical climate (cerebral malaria is however a serious risk). Occasionally, currents can be strong and visibility less than optimal, but these are – however bothersome to the underwater photographer – guarantees of a healthy, vital environment. Raja Ampat also offers exceptional opportunities for bird watching and WWII wreck hunting. Spectacular bird species encountered in the area include Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, the large flightless Cassowary, Sea Eagles, colorful *Eclectus* parrots and both Wilson’s and Red Bird of Paradise *Paradisea rubra*, endemic to Waigeo and Batanta. Those interested in history will love the exceptionally well-preserved P-47 D Thunderbolt “Razorback” lying on its back in 20 meters of water off Wai island. This US Army Air Force single-engine fighter-bomber was one of seven (“Tubby Flight” of 311th Fighter Squadron) which had taken off from Noemfoor Island on a bombing and strafing mission to Ambon Harbor and had subsequently ditched in the area on 21 October 1944 after having run out of fuel. The plane is in perfect shape with only a nicked propeller blade and all dashboard instruments and wing armament intact – a moving testimony to the young pilots, both American and Japanese, who bravely flew, fought and often died above the sea of this area during the Second World War. ●



Gorgonian gardens
Antonella diving among the enormous gorgonian fans at Mike's Point, another celebrated dive site of Raja Ampat.



Manta Manta birostris

Diving with a huge black Manta at a cleaning station in the middle of the Dampier Strait, Antonella offers a good size comparison.



Common lionfish *Pterois volitans*
 One of the most common reef predator species found in the central Indo-Pacific waters, often seen as it hovers near corals and sponges waiting in ambush for its prey.



Sulphur-crested cockatoo *Cacatua galerita*
 Asian and Australian species meet in the Raja Ampat area, known as Wallacea in biogeographical terms.



Waterscape at Sardines

The lush, current-swept dive site known as Sardines offers wonderful encounters with pelagic species and colorful reef vistas.



Spotted lionfish *Pterois antennata*
 Raja Ampat offers unique opportunities for macrophotography. This is a detail of the webbed pectoral fins of the relatively common Spotted lionfish.



Magenta dottyback *Pseudochromis porphyreus*
 A stunning, diminutive, extremely wary species which is sadly often collected for the aquarium trade.



Mangroves

Several locations in Raja Ampat offer the possibility of shallow diving and/or snorkelling in clear water mangrove habitats.



The Passage
One of Raja Ampat's most famous dive sites, The Passage is a narrow, shallow, river-like sea channel meandering among forest-clad limestone cliffs.



Tasselled Wobbegong *Eucrossorhinus dasypogon*

Antonella poses with a large Tasselled wobbegong *Eucrossorhinus dasypogon* - a common Carpet shark of Raja Ampat - and a cloud of glassfish hovering above it.



Karst islands
Topside panoramas of Raja Ampat consist of steep, forest clad limestone islets.



Five Rocks
Antonella exploring the shallow sunlit waters of Five Rocks.

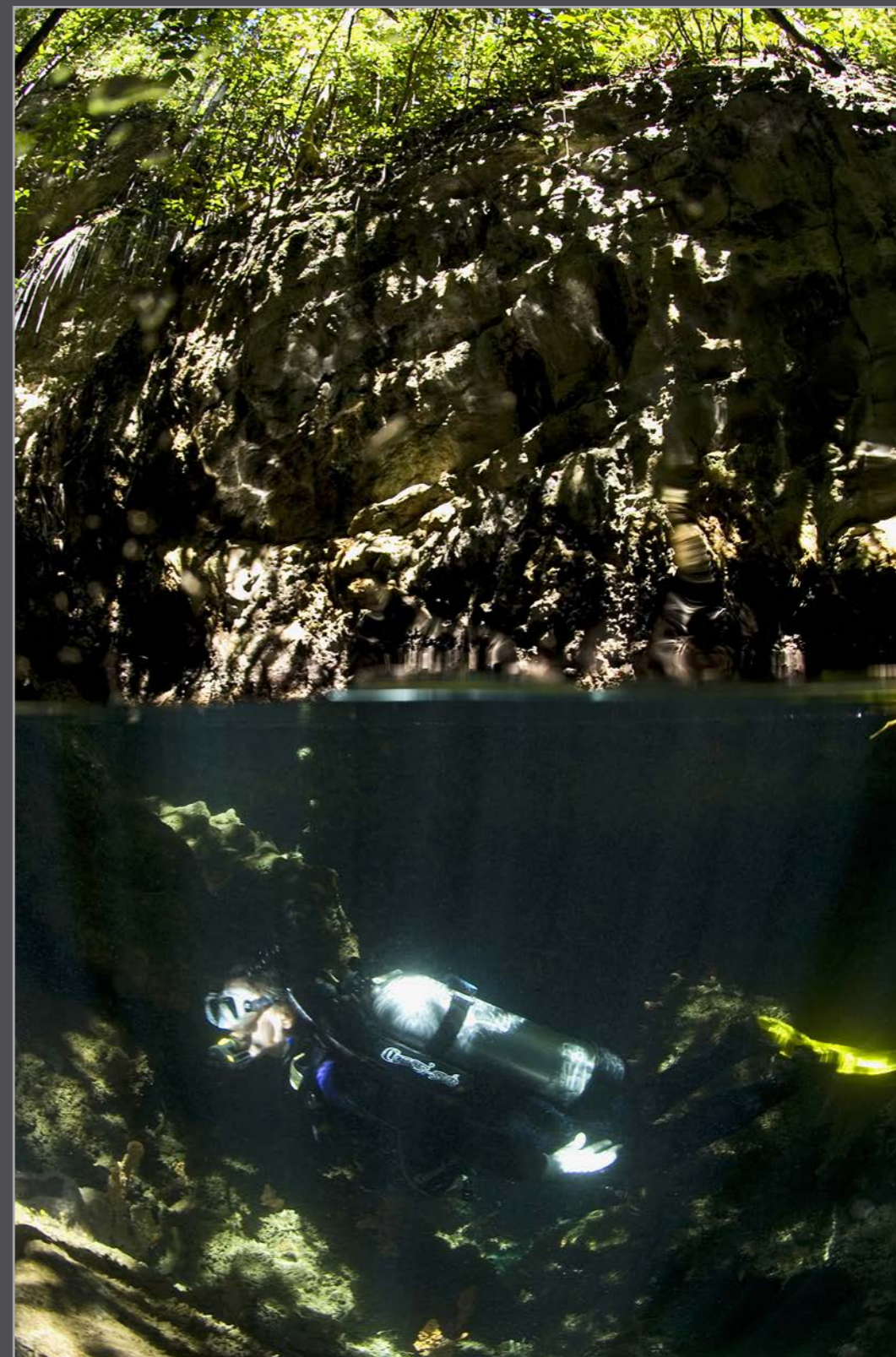


Mike's Point
This is one of Raja Ampat's most scenic dive sites - an amphitheatre-like waterscape of broken boulders graced by a multitude of enormous, colorful gorgonians and sea fans.



Mangroves and karst

The jagged, sharp limestone of the islets is circled by impenetrable mangrove forests.



The Passage

Divers here are suspended between sea and forest.



Manta Manta birostris

The deep, blue waters of the Dampier Strait are home to dozens of enormous Mantas - here one is surrounded by a living cloud of swirling Fusiliers *Caesio* sp.



Ribbon sweetlips *Plectorhynchus polytaenia*
 Sweetlips of different species - such as these at Cape Kri - often congregate near submerged rocks, usually facing the current.



Arborek jetty
 The small wooden jetty of Arborek island is a favorite dive and photography spot sited in the Dampier Strait.



Manta Manta birostris

Mantas encountered in Raja Ampat are often unusually dark, strongly patterned or even wholly black. Here Antonella gives a good idea of their large size.

**Sorido Bay**

Antonella snorkelling in the shallow waters of Sorido Bay, just in front of Max Ammer's pioneering luxury resort sited on Kri island.



Sponges

The panoramas of The Passage blend underwater vistas with glimpses of the forest canopy directly above.



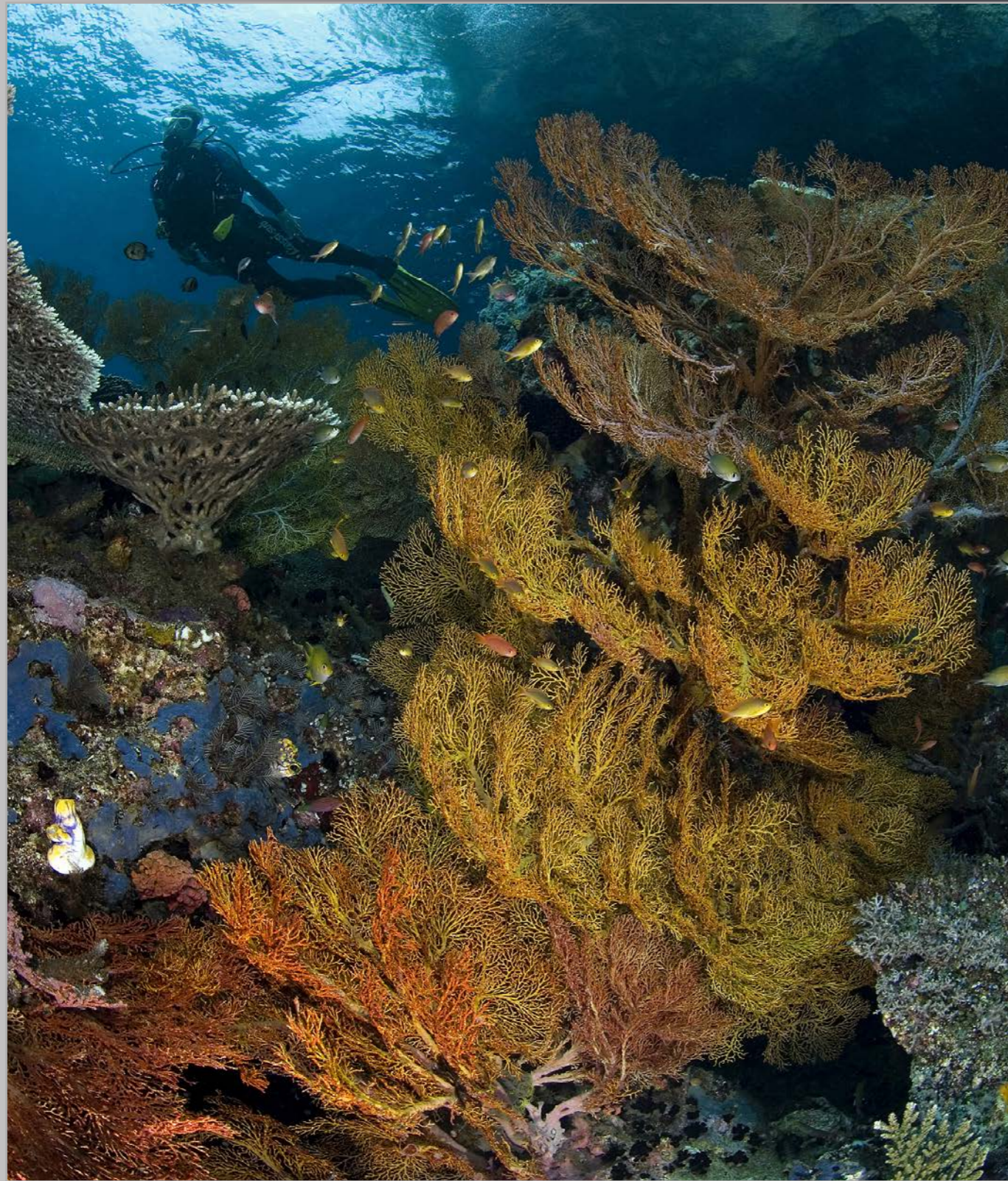
Mike's Point

Steep pinnacles, shallow waters and exceptionally well-developed sea fans define the esthetics of Mike's Point, a Raja Ampat dive site not to be missed.



Wai island

A few meters in front of Antonella, the perfectly preserved wreck of a Thunderbolt fighter-bomber from WWII rests untouched at a few meters' depth.



Mike's Point

A good example of Mike's Point dizzying underwater beauty. Gorgonians here grow in extraordinarily colorful layers and in relatively shallow water.



Raja Ampat dottyback *Cypho purpurascens*

A recently described, tiny and spectacularly colorful Raja Ampat endemic dottyback species.

**Sunset**

Given its latitude, the area of Raja Ampat often presents visitors with stunning sunsets - especially during the rainy season.



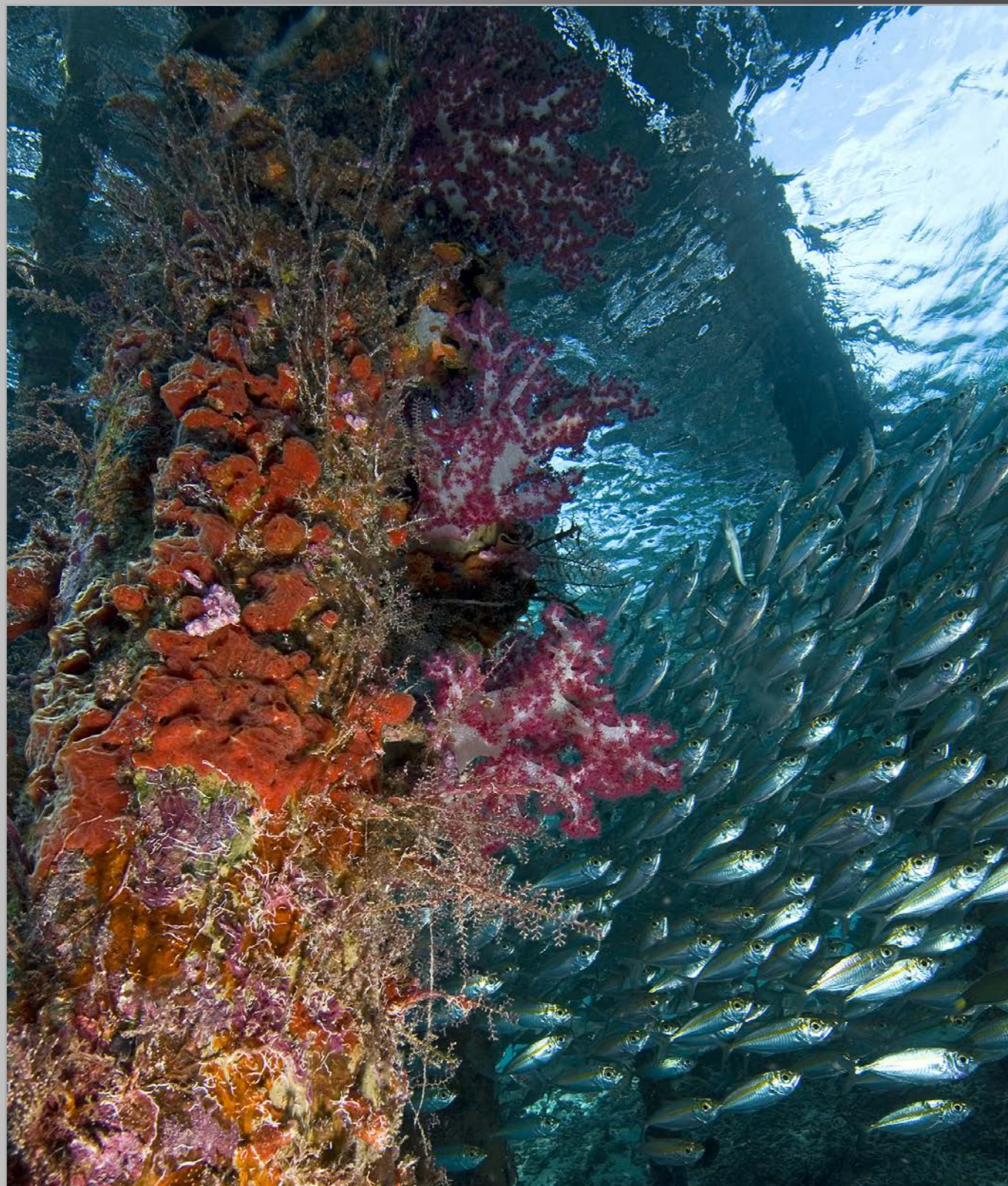
Anemonefish colony

This endemic and - according to some - yet undescribed *Amphiprion* subspecies is often observed in huge colonies, covering several square meters at shallow depth.



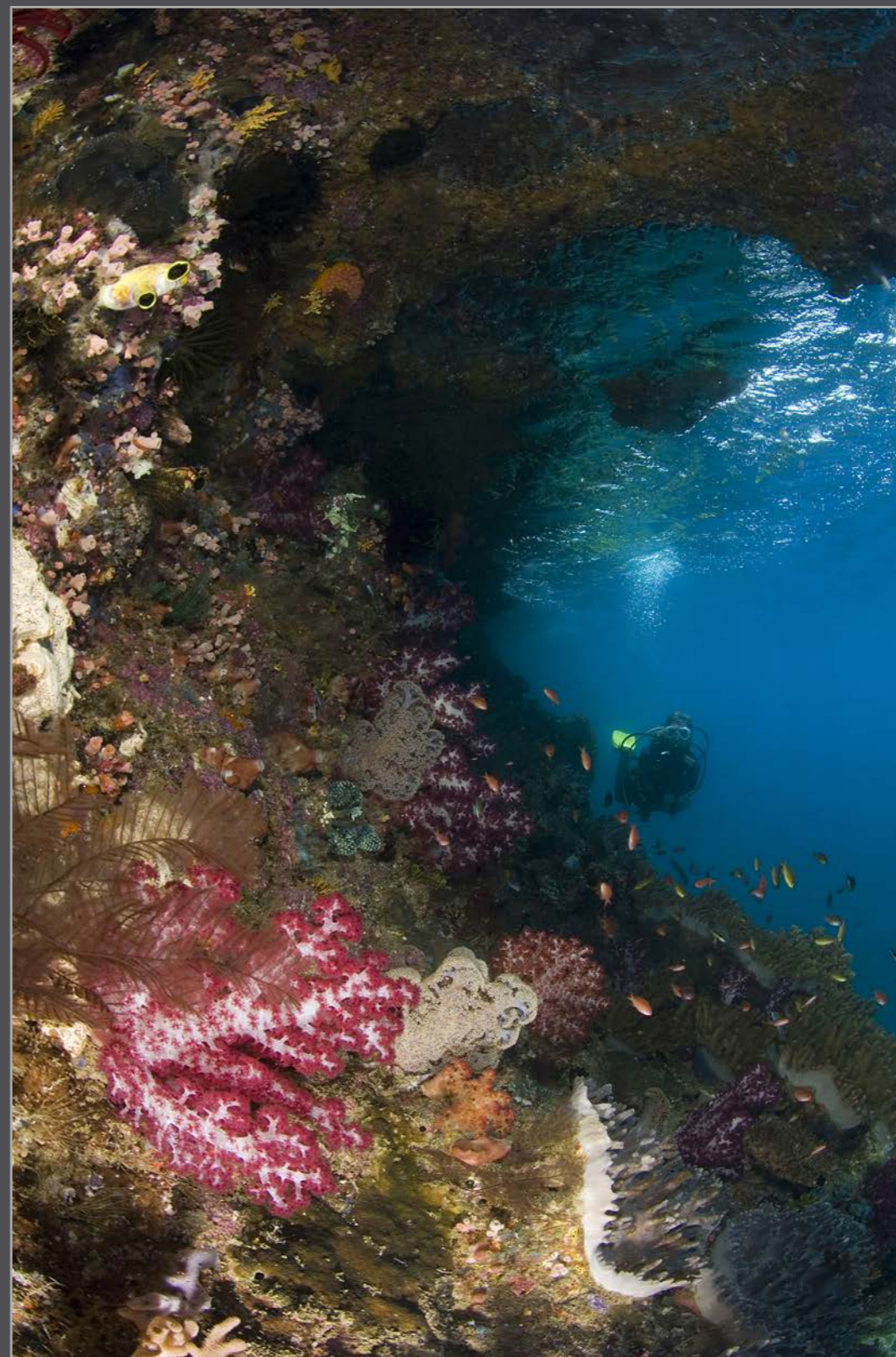
Water monitor *Varanus salvator*

Besides this common and widespread semi-aquatic species, which is often seen as it scavenges food on beaches, Raja Ampat is home to the spectacular Tree crocodile *Varanus salvadori*, a much rarer and fully arboreal monitor lizard gifted with a prehensile tail and restricted to the forest canopy.



Arborek jetty

The jetty pylons - encrusted with sponges and soft corals - offer an exquisite variety of opportunities for creative underwater photography, from macro to wide angle.



Overhangs

Overhanging limestone rocky shores, eroded by wave action, offer uniquely evocative, atmospheric diving in shallow water.



Mike's Point

The archetypal image of Mike's Point, with Antonella hovering in the background, sea fans in front and the forest-clad rocky shore which can be glimpsed behind her.



Soft corals

The current-swept, nutrient-rich waters of the Raja Ampat countless channels offer a perfect environment to *Dendronephthya* soft corals.



Mangroves

A split image of a mangrove clump. One has to be wary of Estuarine crocodiles *Crocodylus porosus* when diving here.



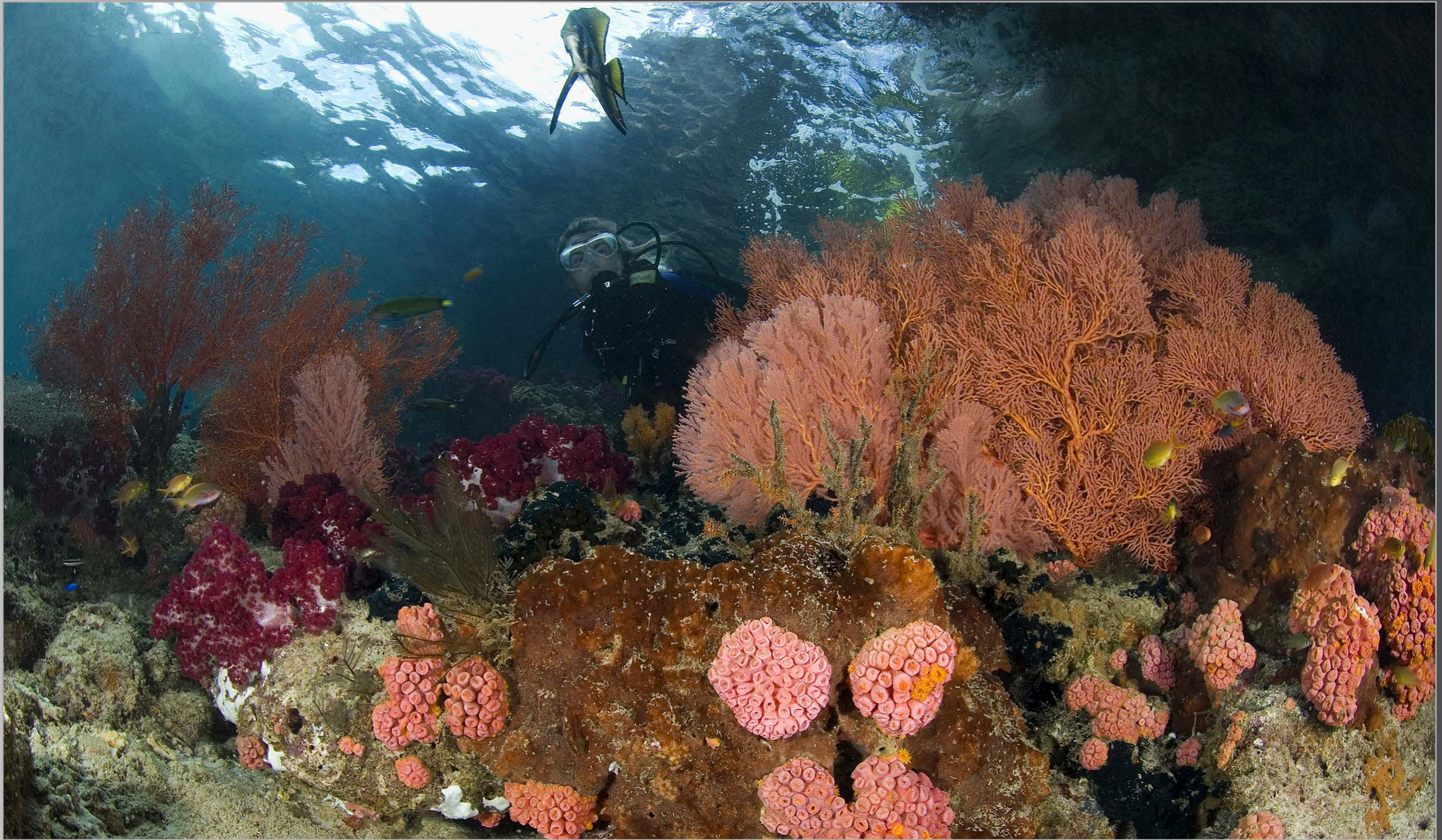
Shoaling Sweetlips

Schooling Ribbon sweetlips *Plectorhynchus polytaenia* among hard and soft corals at Cape Kri, a deep, current-swept dive site which is among the world's best.



The Passage

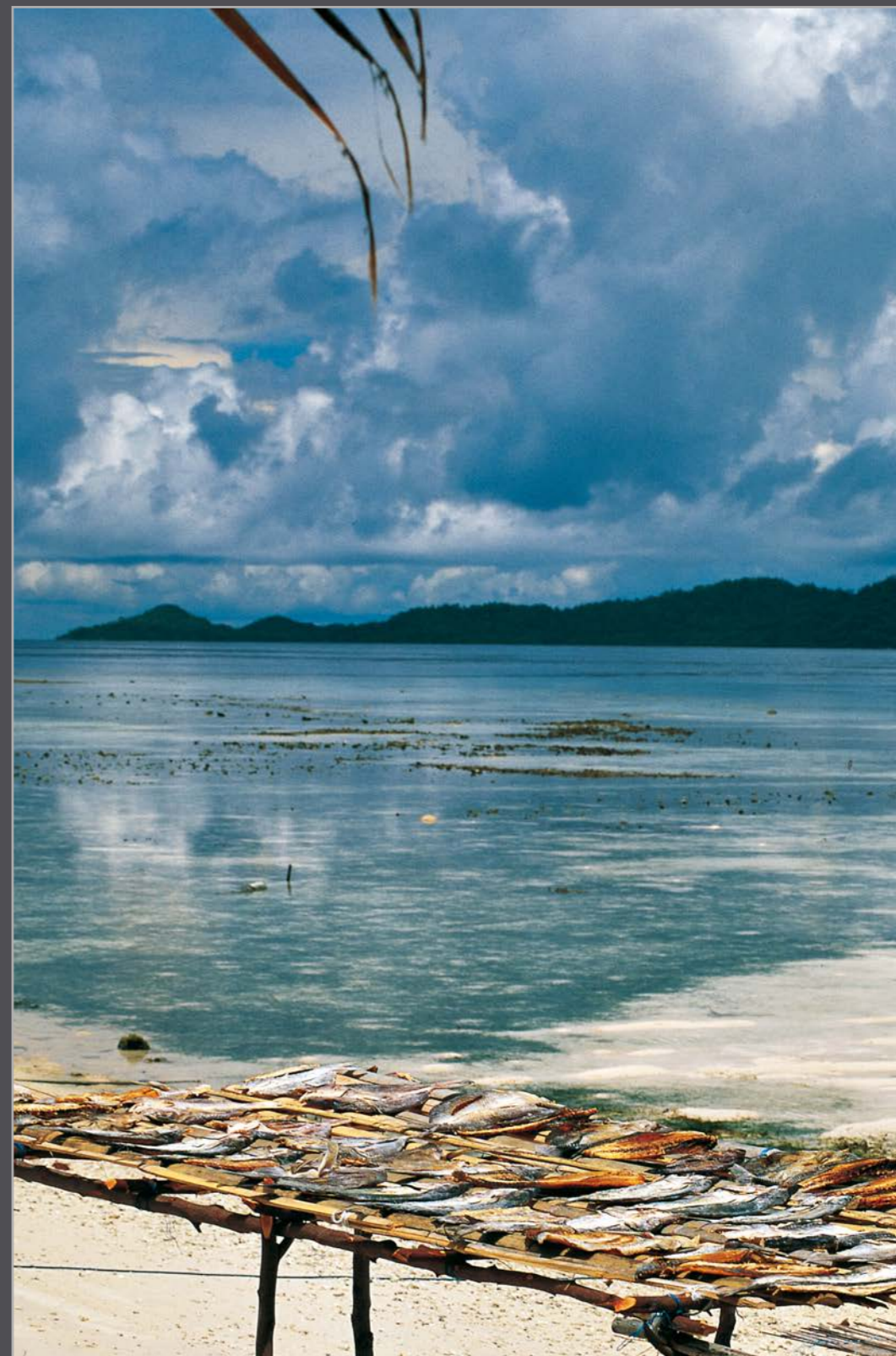
Often swept by reasonably strong currents, the shallow waters of the narrow sea channel known as The Passage offer uniquely atmospheric diving.

**Five Rocks**

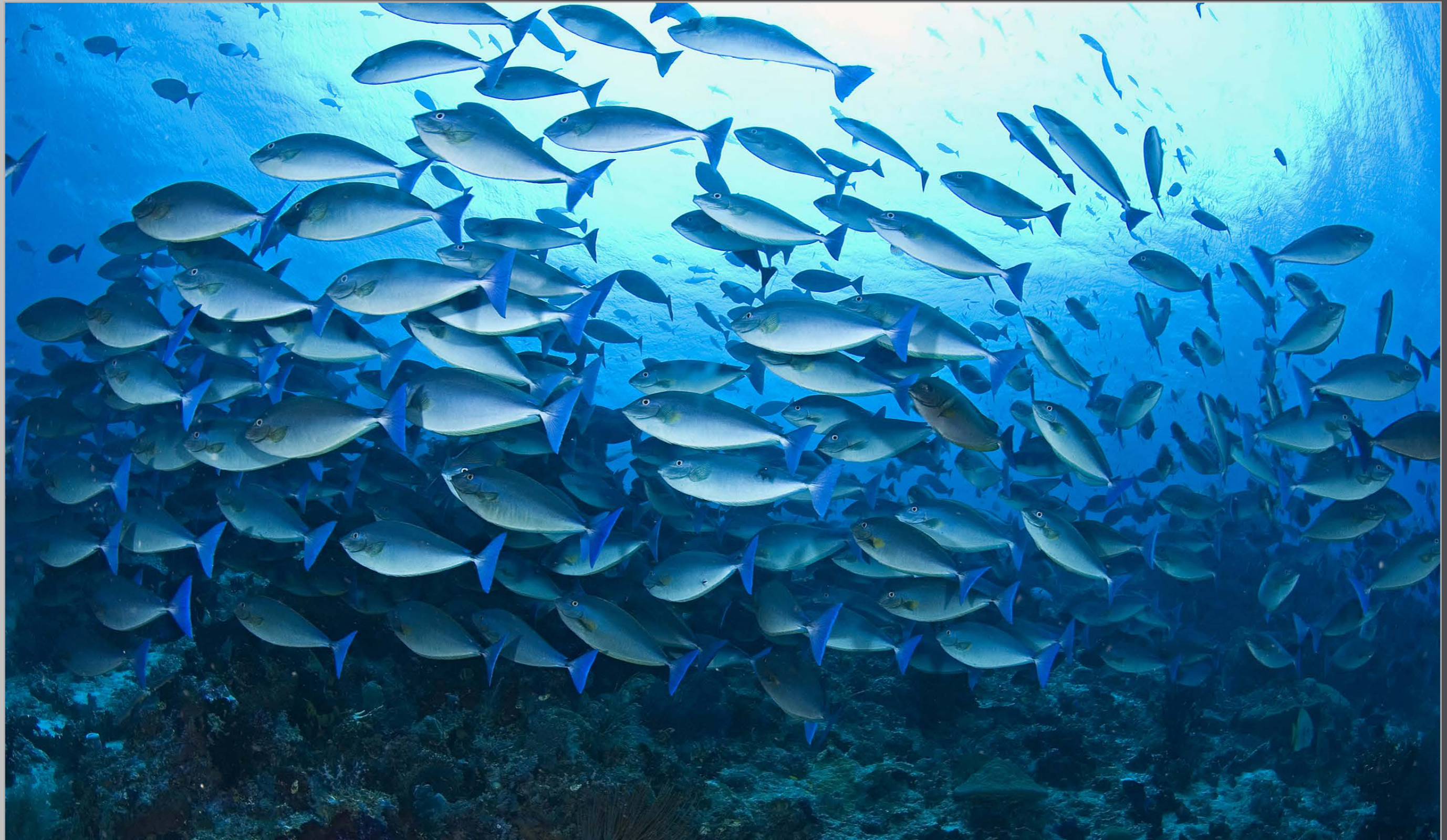
A tribal site with limited access, Five Rocks is a shallow, brightly lit, truly unique dive site offering a labyrinth of coral- and sponge-encrusted rock corridors.



Mike's Point
Antonella hovering the breathtaking gorgonian gardens of Mike's Point.



Drying fish
Fish drying in the sun on the beach at Arborek island.



Sleek Surgeonfish *Naso hexacanthus*

Raja Ampat is one of the very few places left on Earth where one can admire enormous quantities of fish in a single glance. These are schooling Sleek Surgeonfish *Naso hexacanthus* at Sardines.



Ribbon sweetlips *Plectorhynchus polytaenia*

Seascape with Ribbon sweetlips *Plectorhynchus polytaenia*. The waterscapes of Raja Ampat can be extraordinarily rich in life and exceedingly colorful.



The Passage

A large gorgonian sea fan with the overhanging rainforest visible above in what - in photography terms - is called Snell's window.



Manta Manta birostris

More Mantas - the one in the foreground wholly black and escorted by a cobia *Rachycentron canadum* - as they approach a cleaning station in the Dampier Straits.



West Papuan fisherman
A local fisherman sails on his outrigger canoe, a dog his sole companion. Despite being occupied by Indonesia, West Papuans strive to defend their cultural identity.



Low tide
The untouched coral reef at Sorido Bay - in front of Max Ammer's luxury dive resort - exposed at low tide.



Karst panorama

The porous limestone rock of Raja Ampat quickly lets rainwater filter underground, giving rise to a karst, semi-dry, sharply edged and rugged environment with little topsoil.



West Papuan family

Often desperately poor but still clinging to traditional values and their way of life, many West Papuan families of Raja Ampat spend their entire existence on a small boat.



Soft coral *Dendronephthya*

Soft corals colonies can reach unusually large dimensions in the shallow, nutrient-rich waters of Raja Ampat.



Pontoh's pygmy seahorse *Hippocampus pontohi*

Much-loved and sought after by underwater photographers worldwide, this diminutive species is no bigger than a grain of rice and found with great difficulty.



Mantas extravaganza

Divers willing to wait at one of the Dampiers Strait cleaning stations are often awarded the sight of several enormous Mantas queuing up and waiting for their turn.



Denise's pygmy seahorse *Hippocampus denise*

Another extremely minute and much sought after seahorse species of Raja Ampat. Most pygmy seahorses can be found among gorgonians branching colonies.



Damsel fish *Pomacentrus auriventris*

Exceedingly common but stunningly beautiful, another small species which is being overcollected for the aquarium trade.



Five Rocks

A truly unique dive site with very shallow, brightly-lit water which however can only be accessed with the approval of the local West Papuan tribal council.