Overtourism
Is it hurting dive tourism?

Story by:
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Have you ever returned to a place where, a couple of years earlier, you had been diving that blew your mind, and you could not wait to go back? After the first dive on your return trip, you thought to yourself, 'Gee, I remember the reef looking better and there was a lot more fish?' You are not alone.

Several years ago, I returned to the Raja Ampats after a ten-year hiatus, and I was struck by that same feeling. I wondered, "Where was everything?" Having had the opportunity to work in the Raja Ampats when there were no liveaboards, and only one resort, every place you choose to dive was alive with fish, and the reefs were healthy and beautiful. The difference I was now seeing could not have been more startling. Where there was a critter in every nook and cranny, now there were fewer. Where beautiful soft corals were seen floating in the current, now not many as I recall. The area was and still is magnificent, but in my eyes, much had changed. After voicing my thoughts to my fellow divers, I was asked what did I think happened? My answer, before the word 'overtourism' was coined, was 'too much pressure' on the reef. The word was out about the beauty of the Raja Ampats; everyone now wanted to dive there and see it for themselves.

The area where I lived and worked now hosts more dive resorts and liveaboards all putting an untold number of divers, and all that attends to their daily living, into the water every day. Sadly, not all divers are mindful of what they are seeing or what they are doing.

What is overtourism?

The word is a description of too many tourists overwhelming a destination, causing congestion and overcrowding. Those destinations that are suffering are, for the most part, the very icons that are on the list of "must-see places" for both divers and land tourists. Governments and local authorities are looking for ways to control tourist numbers by raising prices, issuing permits to certain attractions, and banning cruise ships over a certain size.

Even divers are now subject to actions being taken by local, state, and national governments to control dive tourism at popular destinations. Many places are now requiring dive operators to have special licenses to dive in their waters as well as charging each diver a fee.

More drastic measures to combat overtourism are taking places around the world, even in dive locations. The government of Indonesia is considering a year-long ban of tourists on Komodo Island to allow the habit for the dragons to rehabilitate. Thailand's Maya Bay has been restricted for more than a year to allow the reefs and island infrastructure to recover; it has yet to open. Boracay island was closed for six-months by Philippine President Duterte to clean up the sewage and rubbish.

Closer to home, Monday, September 23rd the Marine Park of Cozumel announced that they are closing the Southern part of the Marine Park from October 7th until an unknown date and time. The closure is from Palancar Gardens (on Cozumel's southwest quadrant) to Maracaibo, and Playa Bosh in the extreme south (including dive sites Columbia, Punta Sur, and El Cielo due to the decline of the health of the corals.

How did this happen?

Many factors contribute to overtourism, and it varies from place to place: tourism boards believe more is better. The travel industry (including the dive travel industry) is all about growth. After years of uncontrolled growth, it may have passed a threshold. In many destinations' tourism creates more problems than benefits. Overtourism is not just a big city issue; it is happening at popular beaches, national parks, famous landmark icons, historic towns and as we are beginning to see, it is happening at dive destinations too.

Aside from low-cost air carriers, Airbnb, and huge cruise ships, there is the influence of social media, particularly on platforms like Instagram. Instagram tourism has fueled a FOMO (fear of missing out) attitude. It is estimated more than 45% of people rely on Instagram to inspire their next destination.

"'Instagram Tourism,' is ruining dive destinations." as noted in the article by Bert Jones and Maurine Shimlock in the September 2019 issue of *Undercurrent*.

Dive tourism has also shown to have positive effects; one only has to look at the world-wide plight of sharks. Divers have helped bring this situation to the forefront, and as a result, shark populations are increasing. Many divers have taken part in reef surveys and are reporting on certain animal species that, only through the eyes of many divers diving around the world would scientist know if their populations are increasing, decreasing or migrating. The local population in many areas have also benefited by employment in various area of the dive business, and divers have been known to purchase unique goods made and sold by the villagers.

Overtourism is another result of connections; the desire to visit a location and the resulting footprint we leave behind. Divers because of their closer proximity to the natural world are more mindful of those 'connections' than any other travelers.