

Diving Mauritania and Western Sahara

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Trying to fully understand the impact of the lack of fisheries management along Senegal's coastline was exhausting and resulted in both Linda and I suffering from multiple illnesses including our fair share of malaria. Although it was tough, we encountered great projects and fantastic individuals working hard on current conservation issues. We would have loved to continue working and collaborating with these various initiatives, however it was time to head up north towards Mauritania and Morocco; the last country of our West African leg of the expedition.

Heading north from Dakar was trying as we unknowingly chose to drive to the Mauritanian border on the Prophet Mohammed's birthday. This meant that every Muslim in Dakar was celebrating either in a car on the roadside or in the markets. The police diverted us off the main road and into a small village with thousands of celebrating people. It was utter chaos and it took 3 hours to penetrate the crowd and finally make the 2 kilometers back onto the main road. Flustered and rattled by the crowds and chaos we had just come through, we arrived at St. Louis, a fishing town just 50 odd kilometers from the Mauritanian border. Interestingly enough, St. Louis was the port, which docked the infamous Dae Sung N2 Korean fishing trawler, which I arrested on numerous occasions whilst working in Gabon. Not wanting to dig up any ghosts from the past, we spent a relaxing night in a beautiful national park situated literally on the beach and left early the next morning for the Mauritanian border.

Our goal was to get to Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital, from where we would make our way to the famous Bank d'Arguin National Park. The national park is a world heritage site and in winter has the largest concentration of wading birds in the world. Additionally it is the most important breeding area for birds on the Atlantic seaboard, and offers the richest fishery along the West African coastline. The park encompasses an area of 12 000 km² of which the marine component is approximately 6000 km². For Linda and I, it was not only important to appreciate the fantastic diversity of birds (from waders to flamingo's and pelicans), but also to submerge ourselves amongst the reefs and fish to observe and understand better this so-called 'fisheries wonderland'. The National Park is characterised by the huge barren red sand dunes of the Sahara

cascading down towards the turquoise blue and warm Atlantic Ocean. Islands, salt pans, shallow mud flats, inlets and protected bays, divide the coast into an interesting network of variable habitats.

Entering the water at Cap Tafarit, approximately half way between the Bank d'Arguin National Park's southern and northern borders was exciting. But experience has taught us to have few expectations and, although cynical, we expected nothing great. Based on other national parks in Africa, fish were the last thing I expected to see. We free-dived a series of cliffs, which entered the water and descended from 5 to 10 meters to a sandy bottom with intermittent small rocky pinnacles, and caves. What we saw was mind-blowing; the diversity of fish, cuttlefish and invertebrates was astounding. Cuttlefish in the hundreds were spawning and we watched them changing colour, flickering through every shade of





expanding minds and a passion for wildlife and is undoubtedly the ultimate classroom.

Packing our dive gear away was sad, but time was running and we had to get to Morocco. Our goal was to reach Dakhla and try to get our cameras underwater for a look at what another important fisheries port has to offer. And so started a sequence of events I will never forget. Dakhla is a military town. Hundreds of military personnel are stationed here in case of renewed aggression with Mauritania or Western Sahara. This made our jobs as South Africans with video and still cameras extremely difficult. Nevertheless, we persevered and although we were denied access to the port, we managed to organize a dive in the bay. A small-scale dive operator there told us that the reefs were magnificent and teeming with fish life. We could choose to dive a reef or a wreck, and a small boat with security would take us there.

The addition of “security” made me wonder what we were getting into as did the price of the dive - 55 Euros each. This was ridiculous as not even a dive in Europe or the Red Sea would cost 55 Euros, especially since we had all our own gear. After an hour of negotiation we managed to organise the dive for the next day.

On arriving the next morning at the agreed rendezvous site, we geared up and jumped into a tiny boat powered by a 7.5 horsepower Suzuki engine and pattered off. According to the skipper, whom we found out was also the security detail, we were heading to a stunning reef where we would get great pictures and video footage. As we progressed the dark water showed no sign of cleaning up and the 3 km boat drive into the wind took nearly

1 hour and 15 minutes. We were disappointed at the water quality when the boat stopped. It was so bad, in fact, that I decided to do a quick dive to see if we could actually use the cameras at all. The depth was only 10 meters but by the time I got to the bottom there was only a meter or so visibility; sub-optimal in my opinion. We decided to dive anyway as we had to pay for the boat and over we went, cameras and all, into the Western Sahara sea-gloom.

brilliance. Each rock we looked under, or cave we peered into, showcased different fish of varying sizes. A parrot fish of over 5 kg swam past, and when we peered into the cave it had entered a shoal of scianids interspersed with various sparids looked straight back at us. It seemed that in every direction we looked, something was either swimming, chasing or hiding. Incredible.

We used up all of our video and still camera batteries and 3 hours lapsed in what appeared to be almost an instant. It was unforgettable looking up from the water to see the barren endless sand of the Sahara extending to the horizon. That such emptiness can give way to such biodiversity and astounding beauty both in colour and species richness right under our feet in water we could stand in, and a stone’s throw away from the side of the cliff, was inspirational. For me, the diving showcased the perfect playground for kids with



We dived for 65 minutes and saw very few fish. The species of the day with respect to size and abundance was the sea cucumber, in all its magnificence. There were hundreds littering the reef in between the thick layer of silt and a labyrinth of hooks and fishing line. The water was so dark and green it made photography almost impossible, especially given that the slightest of movement would send a plume of silt mushrooming into the water column darkening out the last remaining hope of sunlight. We wound our way through the uncomplicated reef, as there were basically only a few scattered rocks, and tried to think of what diving here must have been like. Were there fish, what species were present and so on? Based on all the ghost gear, the reef must have been subject to over-fishing pressure from the local fishers, which had culminated in not only the destruction of the reef (evidenced by the huge amount of lost anchors) but the deterioration of

fish life as well. It was an experience that was emotionally overwhelming for us, especially after the excitement and beauty of the Mauritanian dive just 570km south. Our second dive was to be on the wreck, but due to the horrific water, we decided against spending the money, thankfully so. Discussing the layout of the wreck, it came apparent that the vessel was a pirogue sunk for tourist diving purposes, and was not a ship-wreck at all. A short-term business plan if you ask me, especially since the asking price for the wreck dive was 50 Euros.

West Africa's fisheries, as I have stated in previous articles, fails primarily due to a lack of political will and structure. It was evident through all our discussions and interviews during our journey. Looking back it is clear that South Africa has excellent fisheries laws, but the inability to police them. Namibia has fantastic environmental laws, and the

development of the new MPA is testament to that. The rest of West Africa is a mess, until you reach Morocco that is, and is characterized by poor political ability and will, a lack of capacity and financial mismanagement.

