

## The Issue



Village in Kofiau. Photo © Dwi Aryo Handono/TNC

## Global Center of Biodiversity

The Raja Ampat, or Four Kings, archipelago encompasses some 4 million hectares of land and sea off the northwestern tip of Indonesia's West Papua Province. Raja Ampat includes four large islands (Waigeo, Batanta, Salawati, and Misool) and hundreds of smaller islands. The archipelago is located in the Coral Triangle, the heart of the world's coral reef biodiversity.

The seas of Raja Ampat host the highest number of coral species recorded anywhere in the world. In 2002, The Nature Conservancy and its partners conducted a scientific survey of Raja Ampat to collect information on its marine ecosystems, mangroves, and forests. The survey brought Raja Ampat's total number of confirmed coral species to 537 (representing 75 percent of all known coral species), and the total known reef fish species to 1,074. On land, researchers found lush forests, rare plants, limestone outcroppings, and nesting beaches for thousands of sea turtles. Subsequent surveys have increased the number of corals to 553—with individual reefs boasting up to 280 species per hectare—and the total number of reef fish to 1,469 species.

Raja Ampat's massive coral colonies indicate that its reefs are resilient to threats such as coral bleaching and disease that now jeopardize the survival of corals around the world. In addition, strong ocean currents are believed to sweep coral larvae from Raja Ampat across the Indian and Pacific Oceans to replenish other reef ecosystems. Raja Ampat's coral diversity, resilience to threats, and potential to replenish reefs make it a global priority for marine protection.

## Human Impacts Pose a Threat

Though human impacts in Raja Ampat are less severe than elsewhere in Indonesia, the

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archipelago's natural resources face an array of threats:

- destructive fishing practices such as dynamite and poison fishing
- overfishing of coastal and pelagic fisheries resources
- targeted hunting of vulnerable or protected species, including turtles, sharks, crocodiles, groupers and Napoleon wrasse
- deforestation, which taxes the region's resources and thins the region's ecologically vital stands of vegetation
- rapid land development, poor land-use practices, and a surge in oil and gas exploration, which diminish and damage marine environments
- future climate change impacts from sea-level rise, increased sea surface temperatures, and ocean acidification

## An Unusual Opportunity for Sustainability

Although human impacts do pose a threat to Raja Ampat, the archipelago's coral reefs and associated ecosystems are relatively healthy at present and have not yet suffered major impacts, unlike many reefs around the world. In addition, local communities have substantial control over natural resource management, and they follow a system of tenure over both land and marine areas. Practices of traditional natural marine resource management, called sasi, are still in place in many areas and include restrictions on harvesting certain species at particular times and locations.

The governance system in Raja Ampat, the local people's interest in conserving their resources, and the healthy status of the ecosystem create the real possibility of designing and implementing effective marine management strategies. Local communities and the government have an opportunity to find a sustainable balance between food provisioning, livelihoods and development.

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