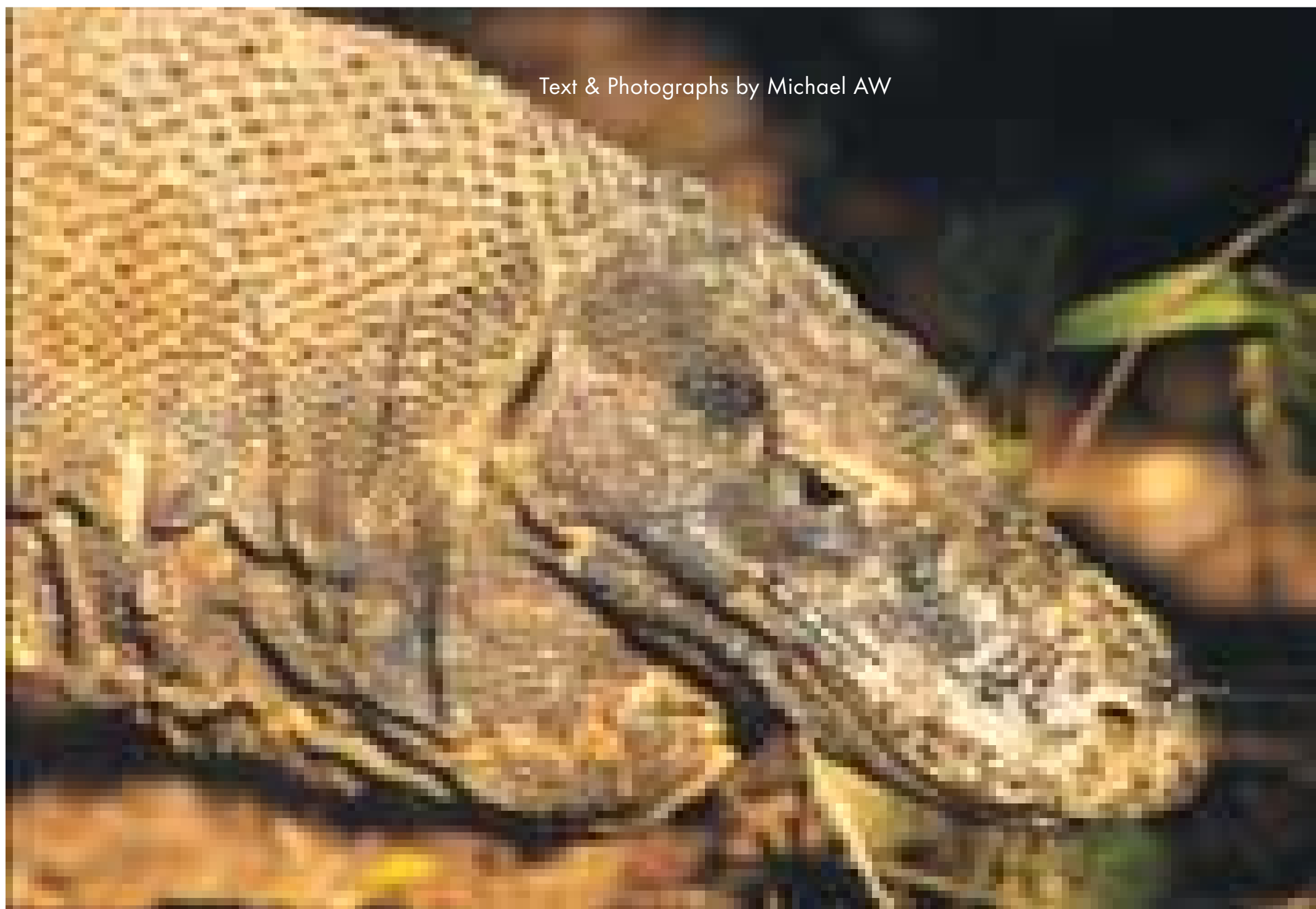


Imagine a savannah landscape of steamy blue sky and pyramid-shaped hills ... imagine Komodo.



KOMODO ARIA

Text & Photographs by Michael AW



Though the island of Komodo is located in the centre of the Indonesian archipelago, between the islands of Sumbawa and Flores, it differs remarkably from many of the other tropical isles of Indonesia. The dry weather conditions distinctive to the area – annual rainfall is about 800 millimetres – support a dramatically desolate setting of harsh undulating terrain dotted at random with Lontar palms.

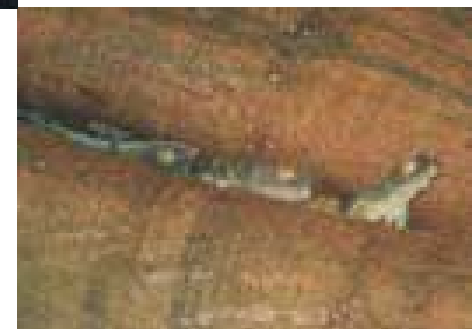
The islands are the prime habitat of a primeval species of lizard, a gigantic member of the monitor lizard family so big that a Dutch aviator reported his sightings, early in the 1900s, of four-metre dragons roaming the wild and barren landscape. His story was probably locked away in the ‘X-files’ of the day, discarded as the fabric of imagination of a mad explorer. It was not until another Dutchman, this time a military officer named Van Steyne, brought two cadavers to P.O. Ouwens, the curator of the Bogor Zoological Gardens, that the Komodo dragon was formally described as *Varanus komodoensis* in 1912.

Today there may be as few as 3,000 of these prehistoric monitor lizards remaining in the wild, walking and grunting aggressively like dinosaurs. Because they exist nowhere else, evolutionary scientists began to lobby for their protection as far back as 1915. In 1977 Komodo Island and its environs were listed in the UNESCO Man and Biosphere (MAB), a worldwide programme designed to conserve the remaining diversity of plants, animals and micro-organisms which make up our living biosphere, and to maintain healthy natural systems.

Determined to play a part in the concept, the country’s official bureau declared the inauguration of Komodo National Park (KNP) in 1980 with the primary goal being the protection of the habitat’s biological diversity, particularly that of the tongue swanking dragon. As KNP lies in the Wallacean Region of Indonesia, both WWF and Conservation International have identified the park as a global conservation priority area. The protected area of 219,322 hectares or 1,817 square kilometres encompasses islands, islets, bays, mangrove swamps and sea.



Home to the infamous Komodo dragon and a dazzling array of land and sea creatures, dedicated conservation and natural resource management efforts are paying off for Komodo.



Komodo, Padar, Rinca and Gili Motang – the names of the main islands – stir up images of exotic hillsides of dry savannah and pockets of thorny green vegetation contrasting starkly with brilliant white sandy beaches and blue waters surging over coral reefs. In 1991 Komodo National Park was inscribed on the World Heritage List.

Within the park there are three villages. One on Rinca, one on Komodo and one on the smaller island of Papagarang. The majority of the 3,300-strong population are fishermen of Bajau and Komodo origin, while some are traders from Lombok and Bima. The major fishing method employed by the subsistence fishers is the *bagan* or lift net, which is mainly used to catch squid. Other methods include reef fishing with hook and line; reef gleaning to collect marine invertebrates at low tide; diving with hookah compressors to catch lobsters, groupers and mother-of-pearl shells; and the deployment of bamboo traps to catch reef fish.

Investigative scientists suggest that reefs around the park are among the most productive in the world due to upwellings and a high degree of oxygenation from strong tidal currents that flow through the Sape Straits. Beneath the water Komodo harbours some of the world’s most pristine coral reefs which, by themselves, are the richest on the planet. My photographic portfolios of Komodo attest to a comment made by one naturalist, that diving these waters is completely overwhelming, and can be equated to being in the middle of a wildebeest migration in the Serengeti.



Visitors to the park predominately come on cruise ships or live-aboard diveboats. Most of the Park is dry, rugged and hilly, a combination of ancient volcanic eruptions and the more recent tectonic uplift of sedimentary seabeds. The irregular coastline is indented with rocky headlands and sandy bays, many framed by soaring volcanic cliffs. The Park is also home to Sunda deer (*Cervus timorensis*), wild buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*), wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), the macaque monkey (*Macaca fascicularis*) and wild horse (*Equus caballus*). All the large mammals have been introduced by man, but indigenous frogs, snakes and lizards abound on the island. Visitor numbers average around 20,000 each year.

dinosaur predecessor, the Komodo dragon is really a fierce predator. This solitary meat-eating reptile is cold-blooded and capable of taking off at a speed in excess of 18 kph. Jumping into the sea or clambering up a tree won’t help either. They are known to be good swimmers and nimble climbers.

The Komodo dragon is a dedicated carnivore and preys on goats, deer, wild boars and even its own kind. And just to be sure that they can finish off even larger animals, their saliva contains four forms of bacteria with no known antidotes. One bite is enough to kill. The bacteria are so virulent that wounds do not heal and if bitten you could die within a few days.

One early morning we took the 2.5 kilometre walk to reach Banu Nggulang, the defunct feeding centre, to find only one dragon basking in the morning sun. Before 1994 tourists used to be herded into a caged area here for protection from hungry dragons. Feeding was then conducted twice a week, funded by tourists of course. A dead deer was tossed into a pit where over 40 lazy dragons would proceed to entertain the crowd by tearing up the cadaver, each like a vicious Tyrannosaurus Rex. Lovers of Bambi screamed and naturalists protested... the feeding was stopped. The dragons became disgruntled, most left the arena to survive in the mountains. These days, only a couple of semi-tame dragons remain to amuse the tourists at this site.

The “safest” way to interact with Komodo dragons in their natural habitat is to stop by Loh Liang Visitors Centre at Loh Liang Bay where a guided walk along a five kilometre nature trail leaves at regular intervals. Though the walk is through a well-worn trail, you are really walking into dragon country. Don’t be too engrossed with giant spiders, wild orchids, wild deers or wild boars. What may seemingly be a dead tree trunk could suddenly metamorphose into a majestic dragon. Despite its seemingly sleepy and silent demeanor, like its

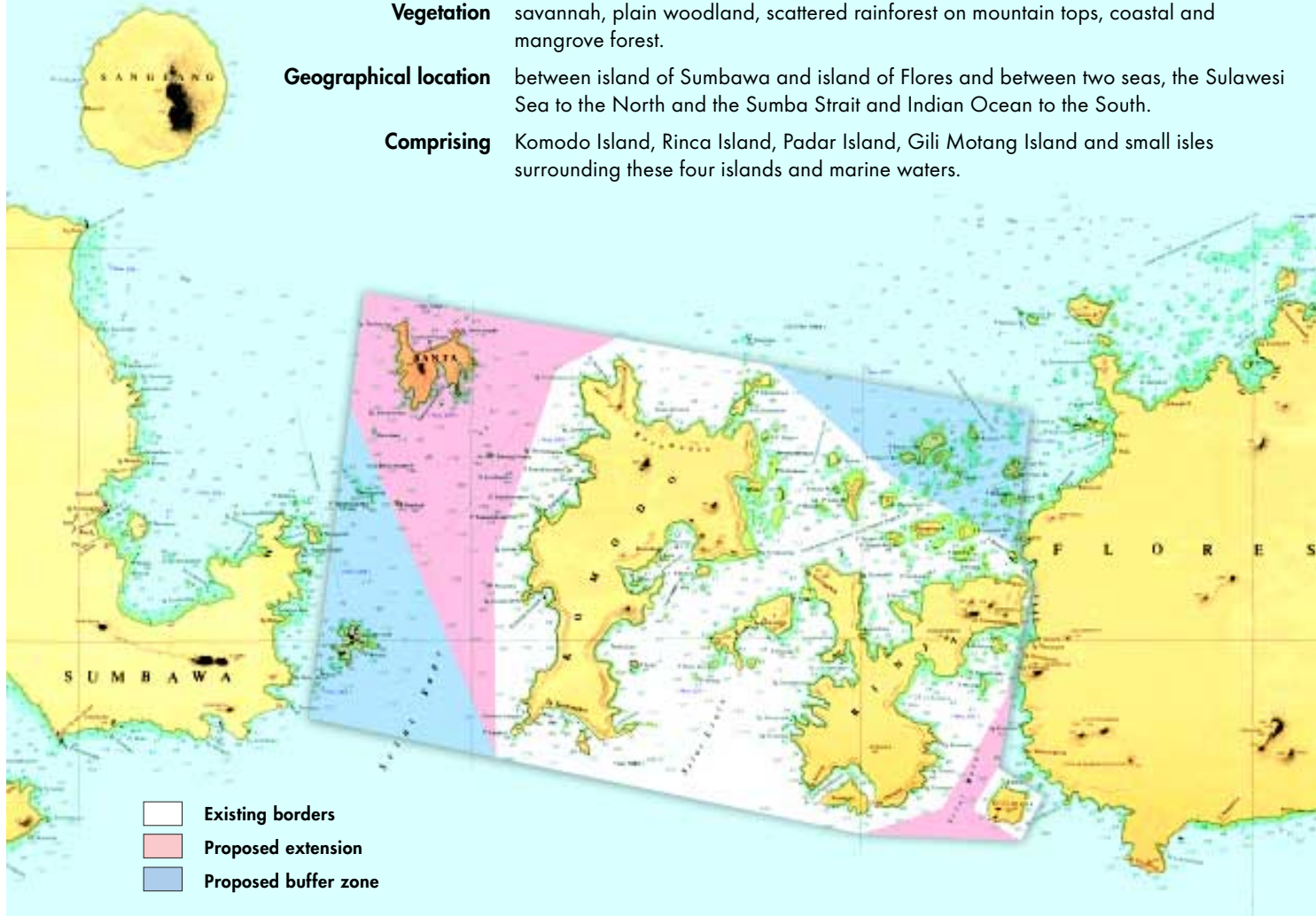
KOMODO DRAGON

- Scientific name
Varanus komodoensis
- The largest dragon found and confirmed by science was 3.3 metres in length.
- The saliva of a dragon contains four forms of bacteria with no known antidotes.
- The dragon's teeth are arranged so that the maximum amount of flesh can be bitten off and swallowed whole.
- A dragon can run faster than 18 kph.
- Dragons smaller than a metre are able to climb trees.
- Komodo dragons are the only animals that willingly practice population control - by way of eating their eggs.
- Komodo dragons are cannibals.
- In ecological disasters dragons have been known to swim to other islands for safety.
- Komodo dragons are documented to be descendants of the Jurassic period.



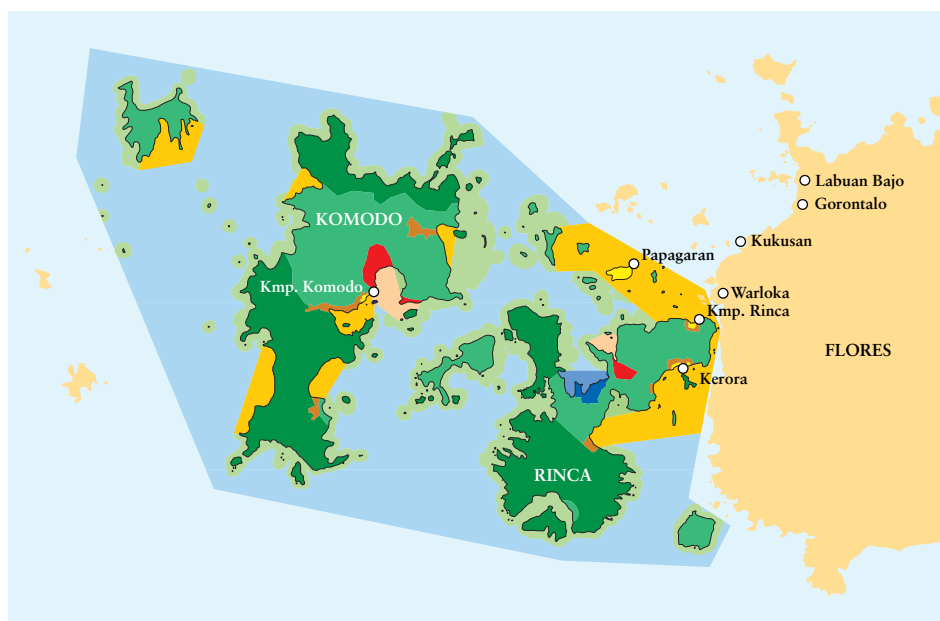
KOMODO NATIONAL PARK

Current size	1,817 sq km
Ratio	33% (603 sq. km.) land, 67% (1,214 sq. km.) marine water
Proposed extension	25 sq. km. land and 479 sq. km. marine water
Vegetation	savannah, plain woodland, scattered rainforest on mountain tops, coastal and mangrove forest.
Geographical location	between island of Sumbawa and island of Flores and between two seas, the Sulawesi Sea to the North and the Sumba Strait and Indian Ocean to the South.
Comprising	Komodo Island, Rinca Island, Padar Island, Gili Motang Island and small isles surrounding these four islands and marine waters.



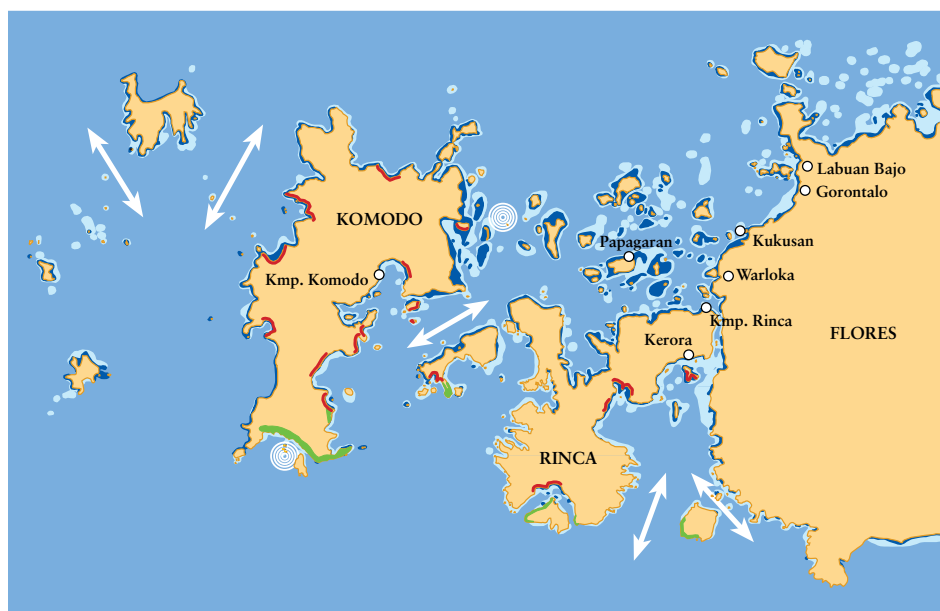
PROPOSED ZONING OF KOMODO NATIONAL PARK (WITHIN PROPOSED EXTENSIONS)

- Core
- Wilderness, land
- Wilderness, sea
- Tourism Use, land
- Tourism Use, sea
- Traditional Use, land
- Traditional Use, sea
- Pelagic Use
- Research & Training, land
- Research & Training, sea
- Settlement



WILDLIFE CONCENTRATIONS

- Cetacean Migration route
- Manta aggregation
- Turtle nesting beaches
- Swiftlet nesting sites
- Reef flat
- Shallow water <20m



All maps are derived from data by the GIS unit of The Nature Conservancy Indonesia Coastal and Marine Program. Thanks to Peter Mous and Jos Pet.

KOMODO CONSERVATION AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AT WORK

A milestone was recorded for Komodo National Park (KNP) with the signing of the 25-year management plan in Jakarta in June 2000. The signing of the plan provides the essential legal framework and tools to manage the natural resources in the Park. Five years of on-site experience, consultations with all stakeholders and scientific studies are integrated into the plan. The management plan document provides a framework for adaptive co-management of KNP with the opportunity to develop a sustainable park financing strategy based on tourism revenues. Scientific studies, on-site management experiences and consultations with all relevant local and national stakeholders and international agencies form the basis for the plan's extensive ecological and social database which has been systematically compiled for KNP over the past five years. Local communities have participated in the mapping of important fishing grounds in KNP. A zoning plan has been developed which stipulates and regulates which activities can be sustained in each of the zones.

• **FISHERIES PROTECTION.** A ban on the use of hookah compressors, used in both dynamite and cyanide fishing, has been included in the management plan for the Park and was recently endorsed by the Bupati of Manggarai and the head of the district fisheries services. No more licences for hookah compressors will be given out for Komodo waters. With successful protected area management, the Park's waters are becoming an oasis of marine biodiversity and fishery resources amid deserts of blasted out reefs and over-fished seas. This in turn attracts more outside fishers, which cannot find quality fishing grounds elsewhere. An intensive enforcement system is presently becoming even more inevitable. In June 2000 the The Nature Conservancy also donated a floating ranger station and guaranteed its operational cost to the Park's authority for two years to support a better responsive patrol system in relation to area coverage and situations in the field. UPDATE: The floating ranger station arrested 24 fisherman caught in the act of bombing the coral reefs in the Park in November 2000. The Nature Conservancy estimates that the patrols – a joint effort between park rangers, police and the Indonesian army – have reduced fish bombing in the park by 80 percent.

• **ZONING & PROHIBITED ACTIVITIES.** To reduce conflicts between resource use and the conservation of natural resources in Komodo National Park, a zoning system has been designed which allows for traditional use by Park inhabitants while at the same time the most valuable and sensitive locations are fully protected. This zoning system also regulates the use of the area for tourism, which forms the basis for sustainable park financing. Area management within the Park is based on the zoning system. A single zoning system has been designed for the entire Park with a total of seven types of zones. Zones covering both terrestrial and marine areas will have regulations for both types of environment. In all zones monitoring, research (with permits), and environmental restoration is allowed. Anchoring except in designated areas, collecting legally protected species, damaging marine or terrestrial habitat, keeping dogs or cats, trash/waste disposal except where designated, harvesting fuel wood, the use of cyanide, poisons, hookah, scuba, or explosives for fishing in the Park are all prohibited.

• **FINANCING THROUGH TOURISM.** A tourism concession is being developed as the best means to implement a long-term financing plan for Komodo National Park; to establish a professional co-management structure and to support community development projects. A joint venture will be established between The Nature Conservancy and a private Indonesian company, Alam Resorts Indonesia, specialising in tourism, which runs environmentally focused resorts.

• **WHALE AND DOLPHIN CONSERVATION.** The Komodo National Park (KNP) cetacean surveys were started in April 1999 and are conducted twice a year during the intermonsoon periods of April-May and September-October. As a result of the recent cetacean surveys, several whale and dolphin conservation measures have been incorporated in the KNP's 25-year management plan, and are currently implemented.

• **CORAL REHABILITATION.** Preliminary results of the coral rehabilitation program in Komodo indicate that there is good potential to rehabilitate destroyed reefs in Komodo National Park. At all nine sites, chosen to broadly represent rubble fields in the diverse park, there was increased coral recruitment to the treatments, as compared to untreated, bare rubble. In some cases, recruitment (number of colonies per square metre) was over 20 times higher in the experimental plots than on untreated rubble.

The marine biodiversity of Komodo boasts of an unimaginable variety of invertebrates, over 1,000 species of fishes and 250 species of reef-building corals, with new species constantly being discovered. Sometimes I marvel in bewilderment, astounded by sightings of animals never seen on previous sojourns. Komodo is like a magnet that has lured me back again and again.

My expeditions to Komodo are like the arias of Mozart and Wagner, each with a different accompaniment, varied in form, and striking in variation from one another. My first visit in the late 1980s was full of drama fostered within the hull of a traditional Buginese-designed vessel that had gone bad. Her two black sails flapped wickedly from crooked, red-painted masts resembling a pirate ship out of a B-grade movie and the captain wondered why she was a delinquent at keeping course. She carried no life jackets, lifeboats nor fire extinguishers. Our weight belts were chains from the spare anchor and the air from her scuba tanks was redolent with sewage fumes! On another trip I tempted fate on a maiden voyage of a poorly refitted dive vessel. The dive ladder intermittently jolted us to our senses with a 400-volt current, the cabins leaked and were infested with cockroaches the size of overgrown rodents. On another occasion I indulged in a five-star catamaran with a 40-metre boatload of rich oversized loud Homo sapien retirees who reckoned that the diving wasn't much but the dragons were impressive.

Well, they were right about the dragons, but radically wrong about the diving. I have been back six times, most recently on board a ship of Norwegian origin but bearing a Greek name – the MV Pelagian – which literally translates to “of



The strong currents provide nutrient rich waters for a diverse range of marine species.

Above: Featherstars or crinoids sway in the currents attached to a sea fan feeding in the breeze.

Left: These Harlequin sweetlips (*Diagramma pictum*) show a variation in the normal colouration.

Below: Large schools of fish are common, these Tetra batfish (*Platax tetra*) school off a BRF (big fat rock).



the open ocean”. On a hot mid-August afternoon, I boarded the boat at Benoa Harbour, Bali, gateway to the heartland of biodiversity leaving behind gamelan music, ancient gods and dancing queens. The trip was to be my finest yet to the Komodo. Premier divemasters Matthew Hedrick and Larry Smith were on board to show us their ‘hot spots’ in the marine park. Both of them have extensively researched the area for marine tourism potential.

On an early halcyon morning, the MV Pelagian arrived at Gililawa Laut, at the northern end of Komodo National Park. Matthew enthused that we are going to dive on a fish aggregation point, a secret location where fishes rendezvous to mate. The plan was to swim along a wall to reach a BFR (big fat rock) where we were expected to see a large congregation of groupers and wrasse and whatever other surprises the season would bring. Once under the water I drifted to see a scenery of gorgonian fans, feather stars waving from standing corals, clownfish frolicking among fields of anemones, starfish and rolling fields of waving-hand soft corals. Thousands... hundreds of thousands of orange, green, purple and yellow anthias and blue triggerfish rose and fell to feed in the passing current. I drifted in admiration. At the BFR I dived through a group of batfish that seemed to flutter like the sails of ancient dhows and then collided with a school of barracuda. Descending to a depth of 45 metres to check out a group of sweetlips in colouration that I had never seen before I realised I was witnessing the display of Spotted sweetlips in courtship colours. The females’ abdomens were dented, swollen with eggs. My consciousness expanded to witness procreation in motion right before me. Animals living on animals, coral and sponges cling to every square inch, some living by themselves others thriving through their symbiotic relationships or as parasitic guests. Soon my time was up and I rose to meet with hundreds of angelfishes, butterflyfishes and damsels on an Acropora coral meadow at 10 metres. It was one of those splendid experiences that was beyond descriptive words.

Though Komodo Marine Park is remote, it has not escaped human exploitation. Indonesia has the most profound environmental laws but enforcement is almost non-existent. Remember it is country of 17,000 islands, which stretches over 4,000 kilometres along the equator — you need a lot of water police to patrol this area. Like other reserves in Asia, the park is a prime target of live reef-fish traders from Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Until recently poachers using cyanide to procure Napoleon wrasse and large groupers were at large around Komodo. Local fishermen blast the reef to rubble with dynamite for the sake of small food fish. Early surveys revealed that up to 52% of coral



reefs in and around the Park had been damaged by such destructive fishing practices. Fortunately The Nature Conservancy (TNC) arrived in 1994 to help develop a park authority and management plan.

Following a Rapid Ecological Assessment and Rural Appraisal in 1994, the task was to design a 25-year programme to protect biodiversity and the breeding stocks of KNP. The challenge was immense, according to Dr. Jos Pet, the Deputy Director of the Indonesian programme who opened the TNC Komodo Field office in November 1995. His team started implementing conservation programs soon after. When I asked him about the problems encountered he amusingly replied, "Every single kind you can imagine!"

To ensure continuity and to encourage locals to participate in the regular monitoring programme Jos has trained Indonesians to carry out the routine survey work in the Park. Currently his original Indonesian protégés are training new Indonesian recruits. However, survey design and implementation are still conducted by the expatriate scientists for research relating to coral rehabilitation studies and cetacean surveys. A total of 185 sites are now being vigilantly monitored on a regular basis for the status of corals and invertebrate coverage.

TNC also focuses on the control of blast and cyanide fishing through activities at both the policy and site level. The current goals include strong and effective



What is rare in other regions seems common in Komodo.

Above: Sea cucumbers belonging to the class *Holothuroidea* are the seas vacuum cleaners. An animal which is essentially a mouth, stomach and anus, filters sand for organic matter. This colourful specimen is a Sea apple (*Pseudocolchirus tricolor*).

Left: Sea squirts, alternately known as ascidians or tunicates, siphon water between two siphons trapping plankton through the pharynx. These tunicates are possibly members of the *Diazona* species.

Below: Delicate ghost pipefishes are members of the seahorse family. They are experts at camouflage. Adapting to their environment, they may resemble a floating leaf like the Robust ghost pipefish (*Solenostomus cyanopterus*) or the Long-tail ghost pipefish (*Solenostomus armatus*); or they may bear frilly appendages - like the Ornate ghost pipefish (*Solenostomus paradoxus*), which resembles its crinoid home.



law enforcement established in and around KNP, and effective elimination of blast and cyanide fishing. The management plan also provides for establishing sustainable fish aquaculture and reducing the demand for reef fishes caught in the wild for the live reef-fish trade. As an alternative to destructive coral reef fisheries, seaweed aquaculture is now being developed and tested around KNP. Pelagic fisheries are being developed and tested as an alternative to demersal and coral reef fisheries. Important fish spawning aggregation sites have been identified and religiously safeguarded. The scheme is to develop sustainable use by local residents. Luckily the local population is relatively small compared to other areas of Indonesia. The strategy is to reduce both threats to the marine resources and conflicts between incompatible activities. Undoubtedly marine tourism must be managed and will help finance monitoring programmes. Tourism will also help deter the dynamiters and poachers.



As we sailed towards South Komodo, cerulean blue water gradually surrendered to the nutrient-rich Indian Ocean upwelling. The water was cold, green and the currents swirled like rapids between the rocks and islands. Six-knot currents are not uncommon in this area and diving in such water demands a higher level of consciousness and preparation.

After the MV Pelagian was anchored in the safety of Horseshoe Bay we prepared to dive Cannibal Rock, an outcrop off South Rincha, where fierce dragons are known to hunt and great whales sing. Indeed Matthew told us later that while we were diving whales swam past the bay and, on the white sand beach in front of the bow, two Komodo dragons were feeding on a dead bird of some kind.

Cannibal rock is a bigger BFR, that falls steeply to 25 metres. Gorgonian sea fans, organ pipe corals, black coral trees, orange sponges, carpets of red, blue, green and yellow featherstars festoon the slope in their hundreds and tapestries of ornamental reef fishes swarm the water column. As I descended through the cold, dark water the visibility enigmatically opened up to a garden of sponges and tall coral trees. I stopped by a snow-coloured tree to find eight Long-nose hawkfish, the most I have ever seen on a single tree. Just above, hordes of anthias glittered in shades of turquoise, purple, orange and blue. Against the evening sun a cloud of anchovies was dispersing and reforming to puzzle hunting jacks. Sea apples, bright red-coloured sedentary sea cucumbers, are found in abundance on the reef slope. I easily picked out one with its multi-branch arms recoiled outward to filter plankton in the passing current. Nearby a bright orange anglerfish beckoned to be photographed.





Nudibranchs appear in a dizzy array of sizes, shapes and colours. Komodo, like many parts of Indonesia, is home to a large number of species.

Top: Undescribed *Miamara* sp, a new discovery for the author. Even after 15 years of diving in Indonesia, new species await.

Middle: This flat looking pair are *Discodoris bohelensis*.

Bottom: In this unusual image, there are actually three nudibranchs (*Thecacera pacifica*). Two of them are mating, perhaps someone is trying to get in on the action!!

I was busy directing my anglerfish into even more attractive positions when a sudden eruption of noisy underwater horns summoned nearby. That is the sound of Larry's triumph – he must have found a seldom-seen critter of some sort. The urgency and rapidness of his horn is directly relative to the rarity of the animal. Because I was slow in responding to his call, he came and gently led me to see his prize – a large maroonish, yellow and blue *Miamara* nudibranch with a pair of oversized horns, a species that I had never seen before in 15 years of Indonesia diving. Such is the joy of diving with Larry Smith. In just over six days he had found five species of ghost pipefish, three species of anglerfish, pygmy seahorse, mating twin tail slugs, flying gurnards, stargazers, and scores of nudibranchs and a promise of more in the days to come.



Moving on to the southern tip of Komodo Island,

the rugged barren hills seemed to radiate a primeval aura. Matthew had brought us to explore a secret place, the highlight of the trip – TNC Rock – a submerged seamount that few have ever seen. Even with the aid of GPS it took Larry over an hour to locate the VHTFR (very hard to find rock) over a sloppy sea. We were warned that this is not a site for the faint hearted; not because of the hundreds of sharks that Matthew saw last April, but because of the notorious current that sweeps past the rock. Once sucked into its path, the diver will be like a loose leaf in a gale, disappearing into the mercy of the Indian Ocean. My first impression once beneath water was of an awe-inspiring panorama. The wall was a kaleidoscope of orange cup corals and purple, pink, red and yellow ascidians. Swift currents avert the settlement of reef-building corals. Immense takes on a new meaning.

Then an unexpected swell sucked me up from 10 metres almost to the surface. I arrested the uncontrolled ascent by grabbing a rock and kept venting air from an already empty BC. Recovering quickly, I signalled my buddy to dive immediately to deeper water. We descended at tremendous speed, stopping at 40 metres to meet with dozens of handsome grey reef sharks and hundreds of Big-eyed jacks. Suddenly, out of the blue, a fish, a very big fish of distinct shape, loomed into view. Our reward was meeting face to face with a great white ocean sunfish, the Mola Mola. I was stunned and mesmerised, too shocked to focus my camera. But

Komodo will continue to sparkle, will explode with life, and will continue to reflect the dazzle of nature's magical creation as long as we care enough to preserve its natural wonders.



A number of commensal animals make their homes on a wide range of marine plants and animals.

Above: In another thorny relationship these sea snails (*Luetzenia asthenosomae*) make their home on a fire urchin.

Left: Living in the spiky strands of a crinoid, this commensal shrimp (*Periclimenes amboninensis*) gains protection within the arms of the crinoid.

Right: The whimsical clownfish or anemonefish seeks protection within the stinging arms of the anemone, this tiny specimen is Clarkes anemonefish (*Amphiprion clarkii*).

Top: This porcelain crab living on the arm of *Dendronephthya* soft coral is unidentified, it is only the size of a fingernail.



the moment was forever captured in my mind. We ascended slowly, decompressing along the slope swimming past swarms of bannerfish. Approaching 10 metres we saw half a dozen divers being hurled up and down like yo-yos. Not wanting to drift away, we tried to use our reef hooks but it was impossible to find any dead patch without colonies of live organisms. So we joined the rest of the yo-yos, every once in a while one would careen across the top of TNC Rock covered with sharp corals and needle-sharp sea urchins. While we focused to stay down, I cuddled my cameras and sought solace with purple ascidians on stems and nudibranchs procreating on encrusting sponges. Whilst a blue water safety stop may have been less arduous, hanging on near the rock made us more aware of the force of nature and its splendour amidst a turbulent environment.

Back on the boat each of us had a story to tell and of course we dived TNC rock again. Though I have dived most of the sites on previous trips, somehow the experience on this occasion was more enjoyable and I am sure the conservation work of The Nature Conservancy has a lot to do with it. There are now significantly more sightings of green and hawksbill turtles, manta rays, mobula rays and dolphins, and the coral is noticeably healthier, the colours of the reef slope have never been so rich, vivid and immense.

In the Park, we did not encounter any dynamite explosions underwater and fishes swam a lot closer than previous years. But around the island of Bantar, located just outside the park zoning, dynamite fishing is still prevalent. During a morning dive I was practically blasted out of the water three times! To include Bantar in the protection plan, TNC has proposed extensions of 25 square kilometres of land and 479 square kilometres of marine water encompassing marine waters and islands between Komodo Island and Sumbawa. Hopefully this will be in place before it's too late. Bantar is also special. On the northeastern corner we swam with dolphins underwater among endless hard coral meadows. In the bay area the critters are equally delightful – frogfish, ghost pipefishes and stargazers are predictably found.

My last night dive for the expedition was along a sandy slope at Sanggeang, an island volcano on route back to Bali. The plan was to start the dive at a SFR (small fat rock) at five metres, where a mustard-coloured clown frogfish had been seen at the end of the afternoon dive, and swim along the reef back towards the boat about 100 metres away. We never quite left that SFR, even after 75 minutes. While the rest of the group zeroed in to shoot the frogfish upon descent, I swam towards a mini wall alongside the SFR that is covered entirely with massive and encrusting sponges. Between grooves of mustard-coloured sponges I found blennies



Top: Undersea condominium? Three Yellowtail fang blennies (*Meiacanthus atrodorsalis*) sleep the night away on this sponge.

Left: More unusual crustaceans, this pair of squat lobsters is of the *Galatheidae* sp.

Below: Flying across the sands the flying gurnard (*Dactyloptena orientalis*) is very difficult to capture on film.



sleeping in a manner I had never seen before. As if enjoying their slumber on a foam mattress, several Eyelash blennies lay gracefully to rest. On one small section three of these impish fish slept side by side. It was a moment to behold and I caught them on film. Meanwhile the air horn blasted frequently, almost continuously indicating rarity after rarity. Two harlequin and one robust ghost pipefish, and a free-swimming snake eel later, a luminous blue dumpling squid stole centre stage for a while. I found the yellow frogfish upstaged by the presence of night critters sitting next to a pair of red *Chromodoris* nudibranch laying eggs. An Ambon scorpionfish swam right into my path, stopping about one metre away ostensibly to pose. Just then, Larry's horn screamed and the noisy intrusion caused the fish to dash for cover. Then almost impalpable to my eyes, I saw a stream of green flickering lights, flowing like water out of the darkness. They were flashlight fish...and there were thousands of them. I switched off my torch and watched in wonder as the light-organ fish moved through the satin darkness, looking like millions of twinkling stars flying across an infinite universe. It was an extraordinary visual experience, totally out of this world.

Komodo will continue to sparkle, will explode with life, and will continue to reflect the dazzle of nature's magical creation as long as we care enough to preserve its natural wonders. Like an aria, the more you listen, the more you feel and savour the magnificence, the more significant becomes the need to protect. 🌍



* The author wishes to acknowledge Dr. Jos Pet of The Nature Conservancy and Matthew Hedrick for assistance in this article.