

## BUTANDINGS (WHALE SHARKS) - UP CLOSE

Oslob, Cebu - 28 Aug 2013

We made a day trip to Oslob today as our daughter Babette, a diver, wanted to scuba dive with the fish, and our two grandkids were just as eager to see the butandings. Asha, at 5-1/2 years, is fearless in the water and can swim and snorkel. I figured that I should be able to do that, too. It took less than 2 hours to get there from Tanjay; 16 km to the ferry for a 40 minute crossing then another 23 km to Oslob. In contrast, Cebu City is 110 km and 3 hours away. Below are photos and commentary.



**Oslob Whale Shark Tagging Program**

Whale sharks (*Rhincodon typus*), locally known as butanding, are the world's largest fish, measuring up to 18m and weighing more than 34 tons. They make ocean-wide migrations and congregate around areas of high food density.

To be able to understand the ecology of these giants and shed light on their daily movement, the Large Marine Vertebrates Project Philippines is monitoring the 10 resident sharks with Archival Temperature Depth recorders.

The AT tag is the same size of a AA battery and can store up to 6 months of data.

Please do not touch it. It is a very delicate instrument and attempting to pull or remove the tag from the animal's body may hurt the whale sharks.

A team of biologists and veterinarians are monitoring the sharks and the tags daily.

If you find a tag detached from the shark or floating on the surface, please call the number reported on the label.

This project is done in collaboration with the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Region 7 and supported by the DENR and OPREP.



That's me almost on top of one of the 10 resident butandings. Each is fed about 15 kgs of shrimp every day. At noon, the feeding (continuous to make the fish hang around), and the viewing by guests stop, and they go off to the deep. They return the next day.



That's Asha snorkeling on the right, with her nanny.

Poster above says they may grow to be 18 meters and 34 tons.



And I could snorkel, too. Note gill-slits on butanding behind.



Left, I could even free-dive, but with mouth closed, unlike the fish, whose open mouth is large enough to swallow me. They say that biblical Jonah's whale was a butanding. Middle, same fish with mouth closed. Right, that's Babette in her scuba gear, as she approaches from below. Later, she said the butanding fin grazed her as it made a sharp turn.



So how did we take all these under-water pictures? We rented an under-water camera for P500, handled by one of the boat men. Images put on CDrom for P50. Other costs for those interested: entrance fee to resort P20; fee to ride a 8 passenger boat with two oarsmen for a 30 minute viewing of the butanding, P300. If you opt to jump into the water, what they call snorkeling, the fee goes to P500, but that now includes a facemask, snorkel and life vest rental, plus a 5 minute lecture on how to approach the fish. A cottage with nipa roof and table is P500, and there is food galore - restaurant style, turo-turo, and special cooked ala dampa style. Scuba equipment rental and dive master companion is P2,200. Quite reasonable all in all. One tip, of course. There are at least four other resorts like this in close proximity. This resort had a/c'd rooms for overnighnters it seems, but I didn't inquire further. There were a number of foreigners. And the beach for just swimming is good.

More photos.



Cluster of boats with guests looking at the butandings. Smaller boat in foreground is food boat. Above, our boat and oarsmen.



Resort entrance.



Sumilon Island beyond.



The rooms for rent.



Cottage for rent.



Restaurant row.

THE RESPONSES WERE IMMEDIATE. HERE ARE EDITED EXCERPTS WHICH AMPLIFY THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE.

-----Original Message-----

From: Nel Reformina <nreformina@optonline.net>  
To: 62ndForum@yahoogroups.com  
Cc: UpscaLoop@yahoogroups.com  
Sent: Wed, Aug 28, 2013 10:53 pm  
Subject: RE: [62ndForum] Ramblings - delete if not interested

Nice pics, Danny. Must be an exciting rare experience. I went to similar experience with my daughter 3 years ago in Donsol, Sorsogon (although being a poor swimmer, I stayed in the boat) where there were dozens and dozens of the whale sharks and they have been the magnet for local and foreign tourists. One thing though that I noticed in the pictures - you were swimming too close to the Butanding which is strictly prohibited in Donsol for safety reasons for both the swimmer and Butanding. If I am not mistaken, swimmers are advised in big illustrative boards to keep distance by around 10 meters. A sudden turn of Butanding could accidentally hit a swimmer. In Donsol, the number of boats are controlled and limited at a time in order to avoid driving away the Butanding and make the Donsol Bay Butanding-friendly. Boat operators go out in rotation (equal income opportunity - it looks like they police themselves). Each boat carries one operator, one "butanding watcher" and 6-12 tourists, mostly foreigners. Butanding watching/swimming by tourists has become a major source of income for the locals and they do not want to lose it.

A nephew owns Giddy's Inn/Restaurant in Donsol primarily to cater to tourists - especially to those who want better accommodation.

Nel

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From: Ferngil@aol.com  
To: 62ndForum@yahoogroups.com  
Cc: UpscaLoop@yahoogroups.com  
Sent: Thursday, August 29, 2013 7:08 AM  
Subject: [UpscaLoop] Re: [62ndForum] Ramblings - delete if not interested + more

Hi Nel,

I totally agree with you.

We've heard a lot about Donsol, and earlier on, even Loida Nicolas-Lewis invited us to go over. But Sorsogon is far, and the quoted rates then for the package tour from the local hotel was steep at P10,000 per head, and I suppose this was only to ride on the boat. I'm sure it is motorized, since aside from the max of 12 tourists, there only is the boat operator and watcher.

The butanding there are wild and Donsol bay apparently is their natural habitat.

The situation here in Oslob is different. The butanding are fed by the local operators, so they are "captive". This has been a contentious issue for the environmentalists. One of them, a tour guide in Cebu and radio commentator, refuses to promote Oslob. On the other hand, the butanding here are "well taken" care of by marine biologists, with radio tags on them to daily monitor their movement and other signs. There are only ten of them. Can we call it a "symbiotic" relationship between fish and man? Men feed fish; fish stay around and bring tourists. Sumilon island nearby, and Apo Island south of Dumaguete are famous for their marine sanctuaries. There, men protect the environment, and fish proliferate.

The local rules indeed call for a respectable distance to be maintained from the butanding. But with the food boat of chopped shrimp bobbing about 150 meters offshore, and dispensing it slowly, and with a max perhaps of half a dozen tourist boats ("bancas") within that bouyed area, the butanding can't help but drift very close to the boats and tourists, especially those who opt to snorkel.

My close-up pictures with the butanding were a result of the incessant prompting of the two boatmen. One positioned me to face the other who held the camera, while the butanding was behind. I suppose they wanted to assure themselves that I would be happy to get my money's worth. I'm no great swimmer, and actually stayed in the water for less than 10 minutes. And indeed, a few times, I bumped into the butanding. The rules here call for a fine of P2,500 if one were to deliberately touch the butanding. It was the fish that touched me. They are gentle and I never had any fears of being swallowed.

Indeed, it was a nice adventure. Oslob is a poor man's Donsol.

Cheers, Danny

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From: Erwin P. Gomez <airgomez@comcast.net>  
To: 62ndForum@yahoo.com  
Sent: Thursday, August 29, 2013 8:58 AM  
Subject: Re: [62ndForum] Ramblings - delete if not interested + more

My son Victor and his mom (she is from Sorsogon) swam with the butanding in Donsol a few years ago. I was so jealous! I suppose Donsol is more developed resort than Oslob. But I don't think they ever got as close to the butanding as Danny did, who was even nudged by these huge though docile marine behemoths, so you probably get a better deal in Oslob.

In a Florida marine resort a long time ago (I can't remember if it was part of Disneyworld, or Seaworld (?) there was an attraction called "Swimming with Sharks." You pay to line up with the crowd in the heat for a half hour, after which you were given a flotation vest, then allowed to take a quick swim across a small but deep pool, during which you may see a dim shadow of something in the bottom of the pool which they claimed was a whale shark. I couldn't even make out what it really was: it was pure harang [rip-off]!

I hope I'll get a chance to check out Tanjay and Oslob someday!

Erwin

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-----Original Message-----  
From: Balbino "Ka Bino" Guerrero <binoguidecebu@gmail.com>  
To: LGU Tanjay City <tanjay@yahoo.com>  
Sent: Sat, Aug 31, 2013 2:40 am  
Subject: Re: [Taga Tanjay Ko Ting] Ramblings - delete if not interested

Just a reminder this is not ecotourism. But exploitative tourism. I personally am disgusted by the provisioning (feeding). It alters the behavior of the butanding from migratory to stationary.