

Chapter 5

Papua New Guinea

Of all the places diving has taken me, none has touched me more than Papua New Guinea (PNG). On the other hand, I believe there is no place on earth less touched by modern civilization than PNG. Going there is like stepping back 10,000 years. It is a trip into the Stone Age. There is nothing else like it. Arguably it offers the best diving in the world. There is no argument, however, that the combination of topside and underwater experience found here is unmatched anywhere. It is stunningly beautiful, all of it, the mountain rain forests, the river plains, and the coast and smaller offshore islands. There are people alive in PNG now who were born before their mountain villages had any contact with the western world². There are probably people living in PNG now who have **never** had any contact with the western world, other than jet contrails. There are parts of the country where pigs and seashells are the major units of currency. PNG has over 700 documented languages, more than 10% of the **world's** total. PNG has the best primitive art in the world. Some of it is applied to the artist's own bodies using paint, feathers, and **scars**.

PNG is an independent country, occupying the eastern half of the large island of New Guinea which is just north of Australia and just south of the equator. It includes a cluster of offshore, smaller islands, most off the northeastern shore in the Bismarck Archipelago. My first trip to PNG was in 1988. Coleen and I were part of a CIUPS group that chartered the dive boat **Telita**. We flew from Cairns in northeastern Australia to the PNG capital city of Port Moresby, spent a day in Moresby, and then flew to Kavieng, a small town on the extreme northwest tip of New Ireland Island in the Bismarck Archipelago. There we boarded **Telita** for ten days of diving around New Hanover Island. The flight from Moresby to Kavieng on Air Niugini, the PNG national airline, involved four stops, each one more eye-popping than the last. One of the first stops was at a town called Mount Hagen in the mountains in the Western Highlands Province. We got off the plane and wandered around the small airport. We saw men wearing grass skirts and bones through their noses. We knew we were not in Kansas.



Highlands man in traditional dress

² Connolly, B. and Anderson, R., "First Contact," Viking Penguin, 1987

As I watched the scenery from the air on approach, and briefly walked around each little airport, seeing the people and the way they dressed (or didn't dress), I realized that this part of the world was very different from anything I had ever seen.



Women with colorful bilum bags at Tari Airport where airplane arrival is a big event



Women with bilum bags at airport gate



Road leading to airport



Flea market at airport



Clothes for sale

Regardless of how good the diving was going to be, and it was, I knew even before we got to Kavieng that I had to come back and see more of this magical place from above sea level. Eventually between 1988 and 2006 I made five trips to PNG, four included diving, one was a topside-only trip I made in 2000 with Pam. The diving trips included two in the New Hanover area in the northeast Archipelago out of Kavieng, and two in Milne Bay at the extreme southeastern tip of the main island out of Alotau.

There are two major topside areas of the country that **must** be seen, the Sepik River basin in the north and the mountain valleys in the highlands. The Sepik River drains the northern slope of the central mountain range flowing into the Pacific Ocean near the city of Wewak. Another major river, the Fly, drains the southern slope. The Sepik is bigger and more developed, with many villages along its 700-mile length. This development and population is perhaps due to early trade with the many Melanesian and South Pacific islands to the north. The best of the country's magnificent primitive art is created and traded along the banks of the Sepik.



Sepik River meandering inland from Wewak

I have made two trips on the river now, the first with Mike Watkins in 1990 on a comfortable, luxurious, but slightly bizarre three-story vessel known as the Sepik Spirit; the other ten years later with my wife Pam on the beautiful Melanesian Discoverer. The Spirit is a low-draft, jet-powered craft that was designed and built for use on the river and never leaves it. Mike and I flew into the Karawari Lodge airstrip on the river at Amboin, and both boarded and disembarked the Spirit after a short ride by skiff between the Lodge and the ship.



The Sepik Spirit

The Melanesian Discoverer is a large ocean-going catamaran, and our trip was one-way between the grass airstrip on the river, and the coastal city of Madang where the boat was based at the Madang Resort Hotel. This involved an overnight ride, at the end of the trip, on the ocean between the mouth of the river at Wewak and Madang:



Melanesian Discoverer



On short final to grass airstrip on Sepik River, Melanesian Discoverer on the river at the left



Unloading passengers at grass airstrip near river and Melanesian Discoverer

River views are breathtaking:



Scenic Sepik River view



Morning on the Melanesian Discoverer

Hundreds of villages line the banks of the river:



Sepik River Village

Transportation and trade on the river is mostly by dugout canoes:



Dugout canoe



Sepik River marina

Most villages have a “haus tambaran,” or “spirit house” where the men congregate to do men things and women (except for female tourists, of course) are prohibited. Architecture in the spirit houses is often spectacular:



Haus tambaran, center of male village society

Entering a spirit house for the first time is an unforgettable experience. You access the main floor, 6 to 8 feet above ground level, at one of several entrances, each with a short ladder. Inventories of the local artwork are stacked around the room. Groups of men are talking, sleeping, and engaged in various stages of crafting the art pieces made in that particular village. But the most extraordinary thing seen is a series of **fires** burning inside the spirit house. Each fire is contained within a metallic fire pit built into or resting on the wood floor. The normal daily outside temperature on the river is in the 90-100°F range, with high tropical humidity. It is stifling. In spite of that, the fires raise the temperature inside the spirit houses to at least 120°F. But believe it or not, the temperature isn't the most uncomfortable thing inside, it is the smoke. An acrid fog of smoke permeates everything,

making breathing almost impossible. But the men don't seem to mind the oppressive heat or the smoke. The reason is...mosquitoes. PNG is a high-risk malaria area. The river is plagued by swarms of mosquitoes, some the malaria-bearing *Anopheles* species. Even if they don't give you malaria, the bites are unbearable. The Sepik people have learned that smoke is a good repellent, and so they maintain a fire inside their living structures during waking hours. As oppressive as the heat and smoke is, it is better than being covered by mosquito bites. Anything is better than the mosquitoes.

Each village makes its own unique art; masks, baskets, bowls, jewelry, animal and human figures, etc., and sells them to visitors and to art wholesalers who have regular buying routes between the villages. One of the largest and in my opinion the best of these art wholesalers is a company called PNG Art, which maintains a large warehouse in Port Moresby. You can buy virtually anything that is made in PNG at PNG Art, and they are very honest and reliable. They ship anywhere in the world. A visit to PNG Art is almost as good as seeing the pieces on the river where they are made.

Many Sepik masks have a crocodile coming out of the mouth. It is a theme that runs through much of the Sepik art, where crocodiles are a big part of the culture:



Masks on display for sale



Sepik masks



Sepik masks

Another common theme is, well, the male sex organ:



Artist with spectacular Sepik figure

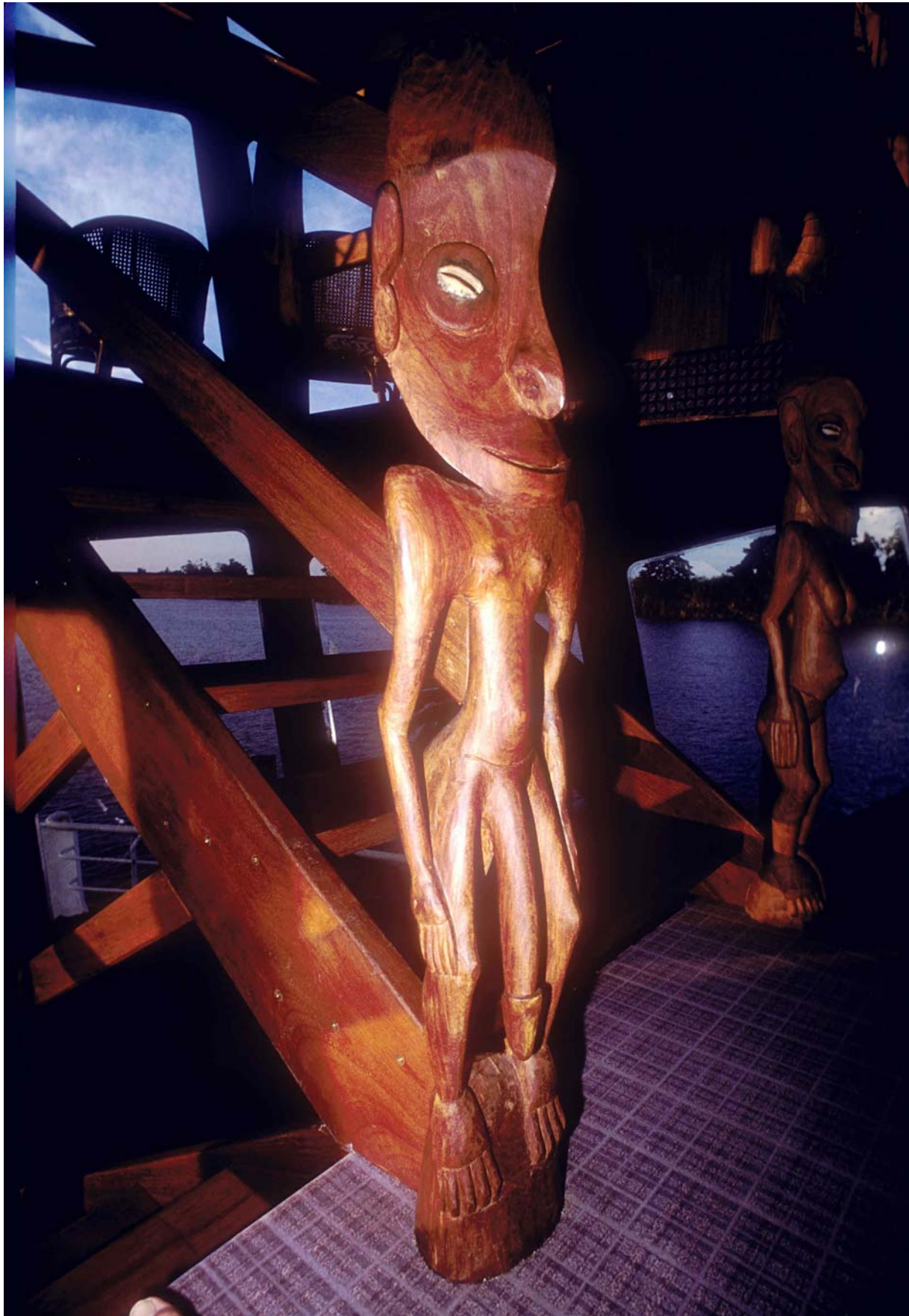


Father and son?

Similar emphasis on the same part of the male anatomy is seen in the built-in artwork on the Sepik Spirit:



Artwork on the Sepik Spirit



Particularly well-endowed wood carving on the Sepik Spirit

Continuing this theme, many Sepik River men wear penis decorations when they dress for ceremonies. They are made from large gourds or a woven straw-like material. They are a big seller on the river:



Penis decorations for sale at river village



Sepik men in ceremonial dress, man at left wearing penis decoration (I think)

Because of the abundance of hardwoods for creating masks, bowls, human and animal figures, and other art pieces, you don't see as much body decoration on the river as you do in the Highlands. However you do commonly see one type, the decorative scarring of men's backs as an initiation into manhood. The ritual is extremely painful (I am told), with ashes rubbed into the incisions to cause a mild infection and accentuate the scar. The scars are generally patterned to resemble the scales on the crocodile but I have seen other patterns. Here is a young Sepik man with a particularly elaborate scar pattern:



Sepik River man with initiation scars



Sepik river kids



Sepik River mother and kids



Flower girl, Sepik River

For me, the most fascinating part of PNG is the vast Tari Basin in the Southern Highlands. In a strikingly beautiful central mountain valley live some 40,000 Huli people, whose first contact with the outside world came less than 80 years ago. The Huli are gardeners (mostly sweet potatoes) and pig farmers. The pigs provide meat and are the standard of wealth in Huli society, used as a unit of currency. It is a male-dominated patriarchal society, where the women do most of the day-to-day gardening and pig-tending work and the men provide protection from potentially adversary neighbors. It's a pretty good deal for the men. Men and women, even married men and women, live separately, men in a central "spirit house" and women, children, and pigs in surrounding huts. Conjugal visits occur away from either domicile. The society is polygamous, and wives are purchased with pigs paid to the bride's family. The more pigs, the more wives and even more pigs—leading to more wealth and more status. A wonderful, moving study of PNG highland culture is Peter Matthiessen's book, *"Under the Mountain Wall"*³.

³ Matthiessen, P. *"Under the Mountain Wall: A Chronicle of Two Seasons in Stone Age New Guinea,"* Penguin Books, ISBN 0-14-02.5270-3, 1962



Huli woman with pigs



"Piggy-back"



Huli woman tending kids and pigs in Tari Valley

On the slopes of the mountains surrounding the Tari Valley is a magnificent facility known as the Ambua Lodge. It makes visiting the area a delight for the tourist. Transportation is provided between the airport and the lodge. Guests are accommodated in round grass-roofed huts with all the amenities. Meals are served family style, and tours to the villages in the valley are arranged every day. I stayed here on both of my Highlands trips, first in 1990 and then ten years later in 2000.



Ambua Lodge with Tari Valley in background

The Hulis lack the raw materials available to the Sepik River people for artwork, but they solve that by using their own bodies as canvases. Every social situation calls for a different type of body decoration, including paint, nose bones, feathers, animal skins, and giant human-hair wigs worn by the men (thus the name “Wigmen”). Seeing these people in ceremonial dress reminds one of a human coral reef.



Huli Wigman from Tari Valley in Southern Highlands



Huli Wigman from Tari Valley in Southern Highlands



Young Huli woman from Tari Valley in Southern Highlands

Huli kids in day-to-day life:



Huli boy



Huli girl with child



Huli boy practicing face painting



Huli kids

At one of the Tari villages we saw a “pre-wedding” bridal ceremony. Here is the bride:



Huli bride



Huli bride



Mother of Huli bride

When a husband dies, the widows go into one year of mourning. Shortly after the death, 365 strings of beads are hung around the widow's neck, and she paints her body with a chalky-white substance. Both indicate that the woman is in mourning. The white body paint is to make the woman less attractive and reduce temptations and advances from other men during the mourning period. Each day, one string of beads is removed. After one year of mourning the last string of beads is removed and the woman gets to clean off the white paint and seek a new husband.



Huli widow during one-year mourning period for departed husband

With increasing Western influence, the Huli culture is fading. The mix between the old and new cultures is now very apparent in the villages in the Tari basin. It is not uncommon there to see a Huli warrior, fully decked out in bright yellow and red body paint, hair wig, and nose bone, side-by-side with men dressed in Dockers and Rambo T-shirts.



Old and new at Tari airport

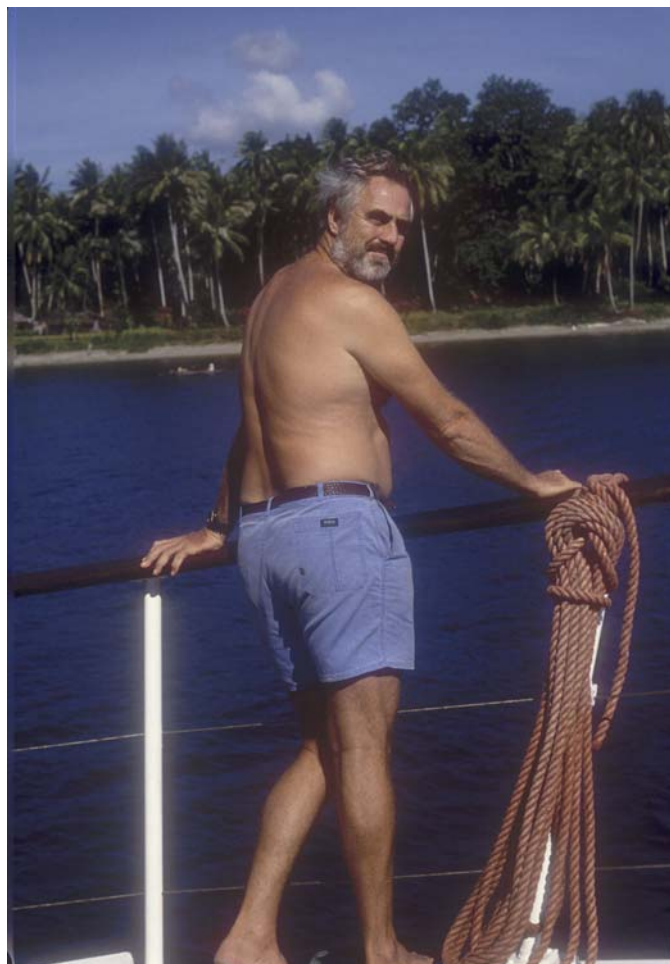
If you want to see this amazing part of the world the way it has been for centuries, you'd better hurry up. On January 26, 2000 during my last visit to the Tari basin I wrote the following in my log:

"Fewer men in traditional dress at Tari (town and airport) but saw many farther down the road towards Ambua. More missionaries and churches. First signs of begging from kids. Fewer pigs on the road. More organized shows in villages with more men and better photo opps."

Oh yes, I almost forgot, the diving. It's easy to get distracted in the Stone Age. My first three dive trips to PNG were on the classic liveaboard boat **Telita**, owned by the legendary Bob and Dinah Halstead. Bob, born in England but now an Australian citizen, and Dinah, a Papua New Guinean from Milne Bay, are the pioneers of PNG diving. The boat is named after their beautiful daughter. Bob and Dinah operated **Telita** for about 20 years until selling it to a large Australian dive outfit (Mike Ball). My last trip on **Telita**, in 1997, was after Bob had sold the boat and was one of its last cruises in PNG. Bob was on board as a celebrity guest.



*Dive boat **Telita***



*Bob Halstead on the **Telita**, New Hanover Island, 1988*

My fourth and last PNG dive trip (in 2006) was with Chris Newbert and Deda Wilms on the boat **Febrina**.



*Dive boat **Febrina** at Kwato Wharf, Milne Bay*

One of the delightful fringe benefits of PNG diving is the inevitable fleet of small outrigger dugout canoes that appears shortly after you anchor. This seems to happen anywhere, whether or not a village is visible. Silently they seem to come out of nowhere. Big ones and little ones show up, some with solo drivers and some with whole families. Some are just curious about us, but most are selling stuff, vegetables, fruit, artwork, jewelry, flowers. A cluster of canoes surrounds our boat for the entire time we are at anchor. Our boat crews almost always buy fresh fruit and vegetables from them. It is a true delight to watch all this develop.



Canoes in Milne Bay



The fleet arrives



Young boy selling bananas and jewelry



Sometimes the dogs come out with the family



Father and son, Milne Bay

Here's what the canoes look like from underwater:



*Canoes underwater, **Telita** at left, Milne Bay (note diver on swimstep)*



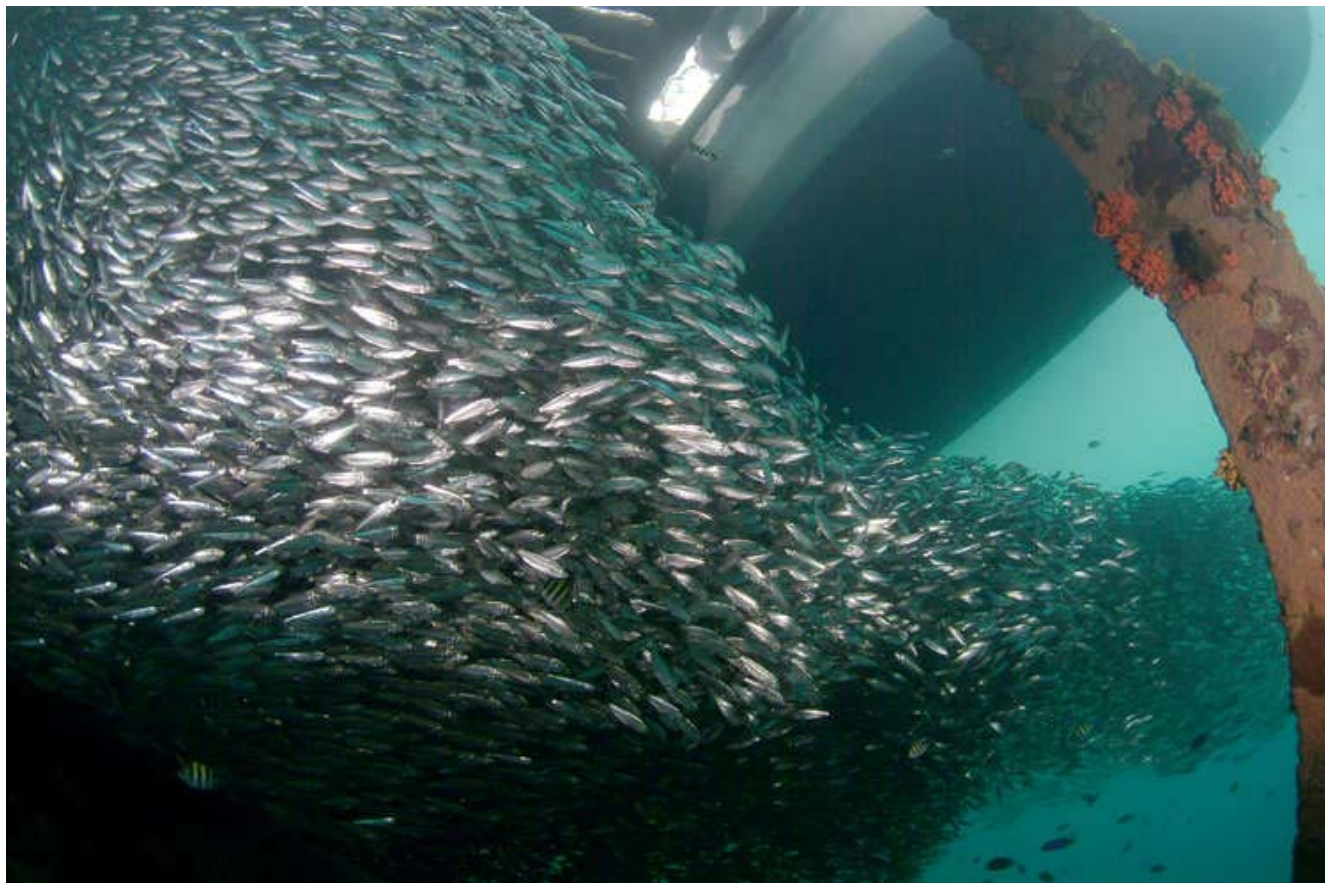
Diver under canoe, Milne Bay

From above water it is impossible to tell that a small wharf at Esa' Ala in Milne Bay is one of PNG's best dive sites, but it is. Here a small water-taxi boat is loading and unloading passengers:

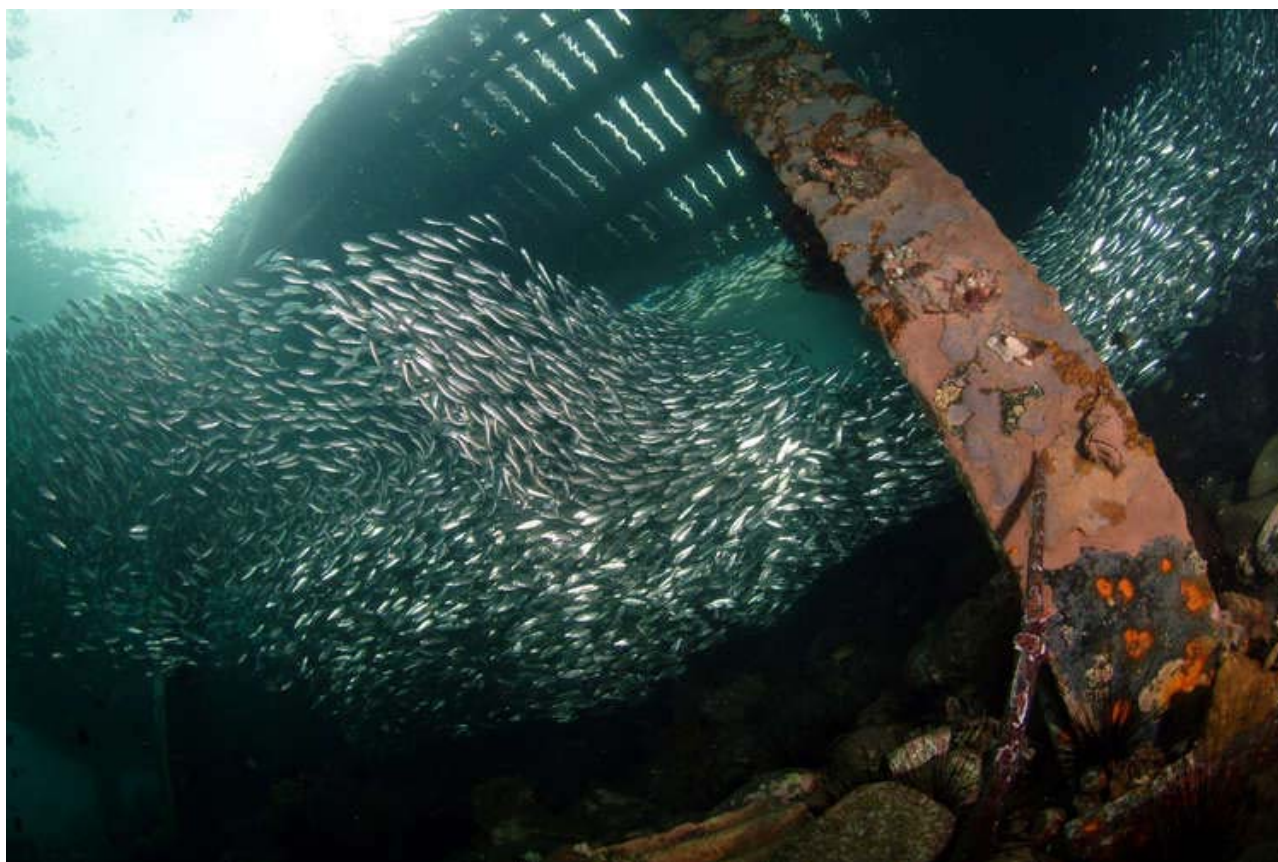


Esa' Ala Wharf above water

The attraction here is a huge, and I mean **REALLY** huge, school—no, **shoal** of small fish that is always under the wharf. I sat on the shallow bottom and fired off more than 100 frames as the shoal changed size and shape before my eyes. Is there a leader to this mass of fish life? Does one fish decide which way to go? One of life's unsolved mysteries. This is one of my favorite dive sites in the entire world. Photos from this place have won a number of major international underwater photo contests. For my photos here I used the Nikon 10.5mm fisheye lens. This is a wonderful lens for underwater work where there are very few straight lines and the corner distortion presents no problems. Here at Esa' Ala there are straight lines, the piling, and if the pile is near the edges of the frame the lens makes it look curved. But the 10.5mm lens, in my opinion, is the best way to show the scope of the fish and I don't think the distortion of the piles is too distracting.



Esa' Ala Wharf underwater, Milne Bay

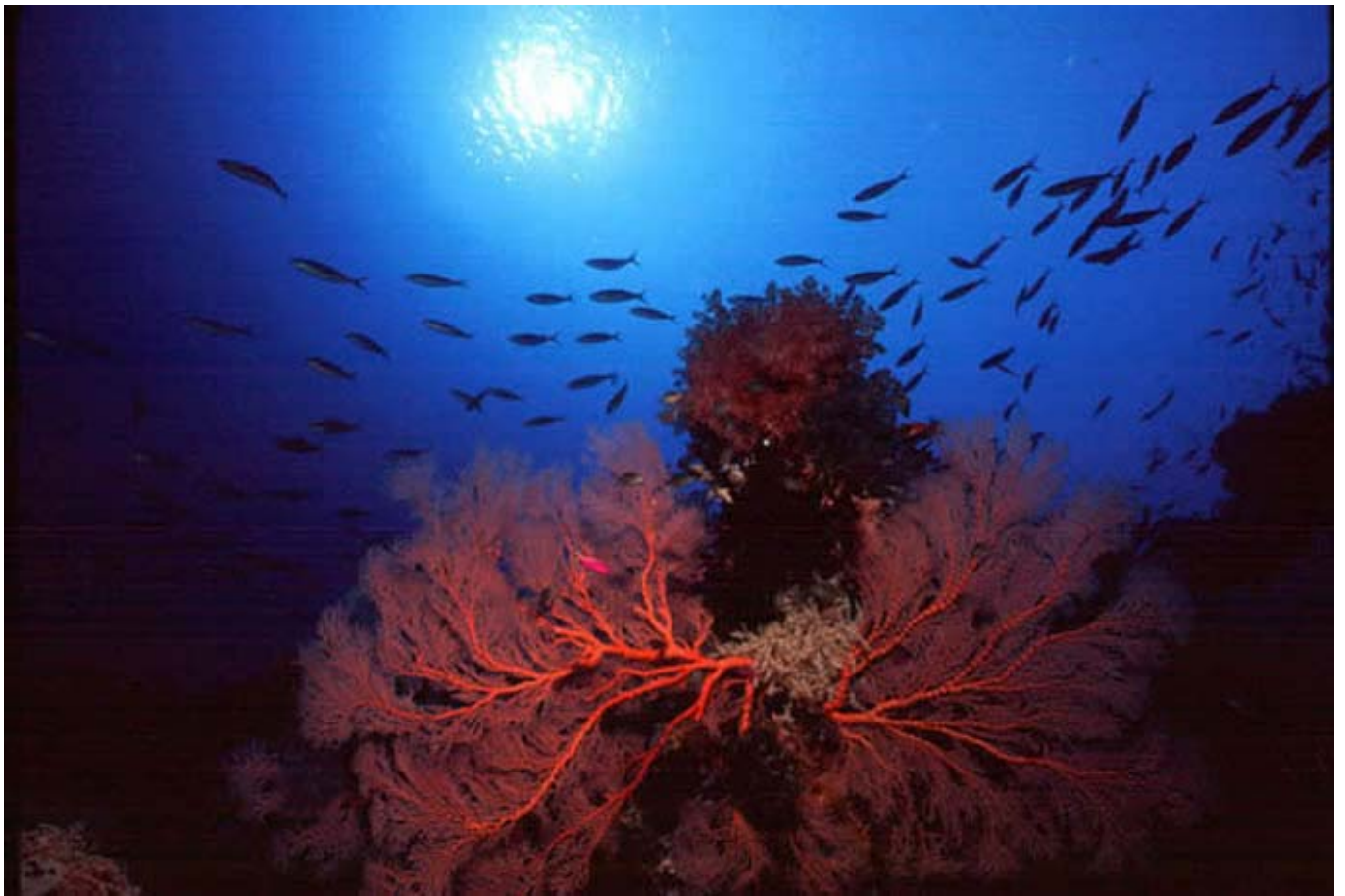


Esa' Ala Wharf underwater, Milne Bay



Fish warp, Milne Bay

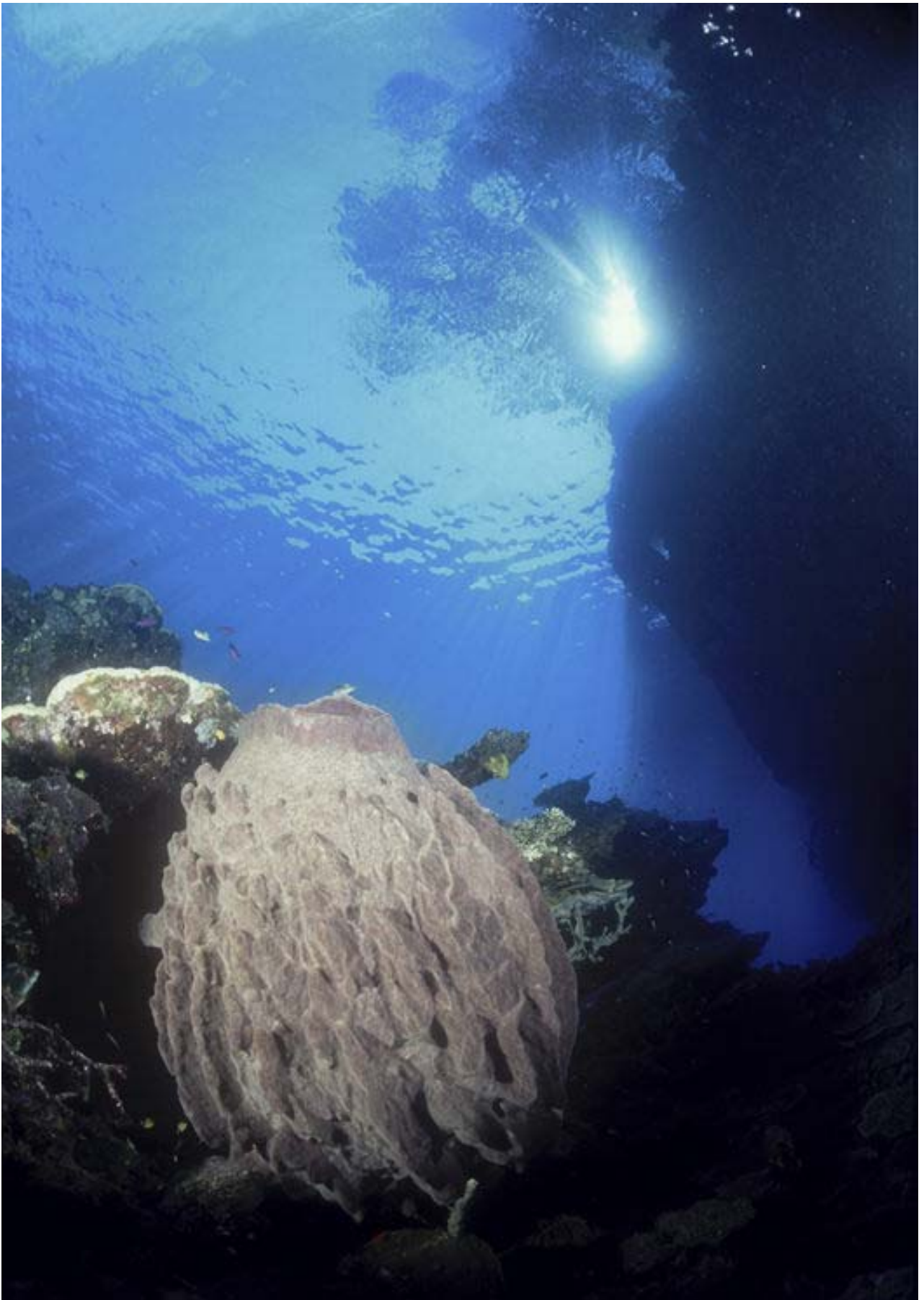
Wide-angle reef scenic panoramas are everywhere. The following image was taken in 1988 when I was trying hard to make my photos look like Chris Newbert's:



Reef scene, New Hanover Island



Reef scene, Milne Bay



Barrel sponge (note trees above water), Milne Bay



Morning in Milne Bay



Jewels, Milne Bay



Reef scene with nice stand of soft coral, Milne Bay

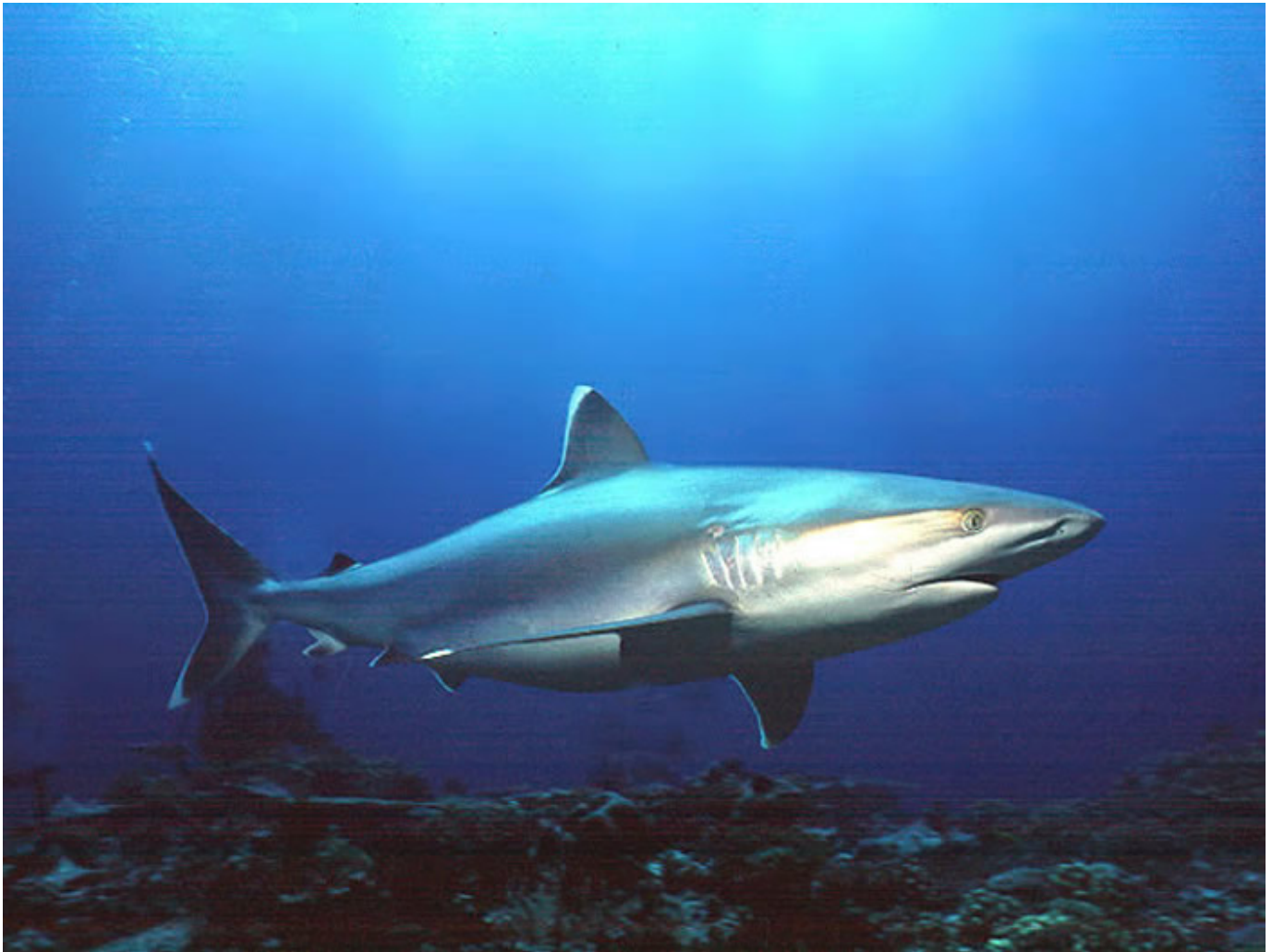


Reef scene, dive boat Febrina above, Milne Bay



Reef scene, Febrina above, Milne Bay

Bob and Dinah used to do a baited shark dive on a reef off of New Hanover Island. It attracted many silvertips, in my opinion one of the world's most beautiful sharks. I made this following image in 1990, and it was published in the *Nature Company Guide to Sharks and Rays*⁴:



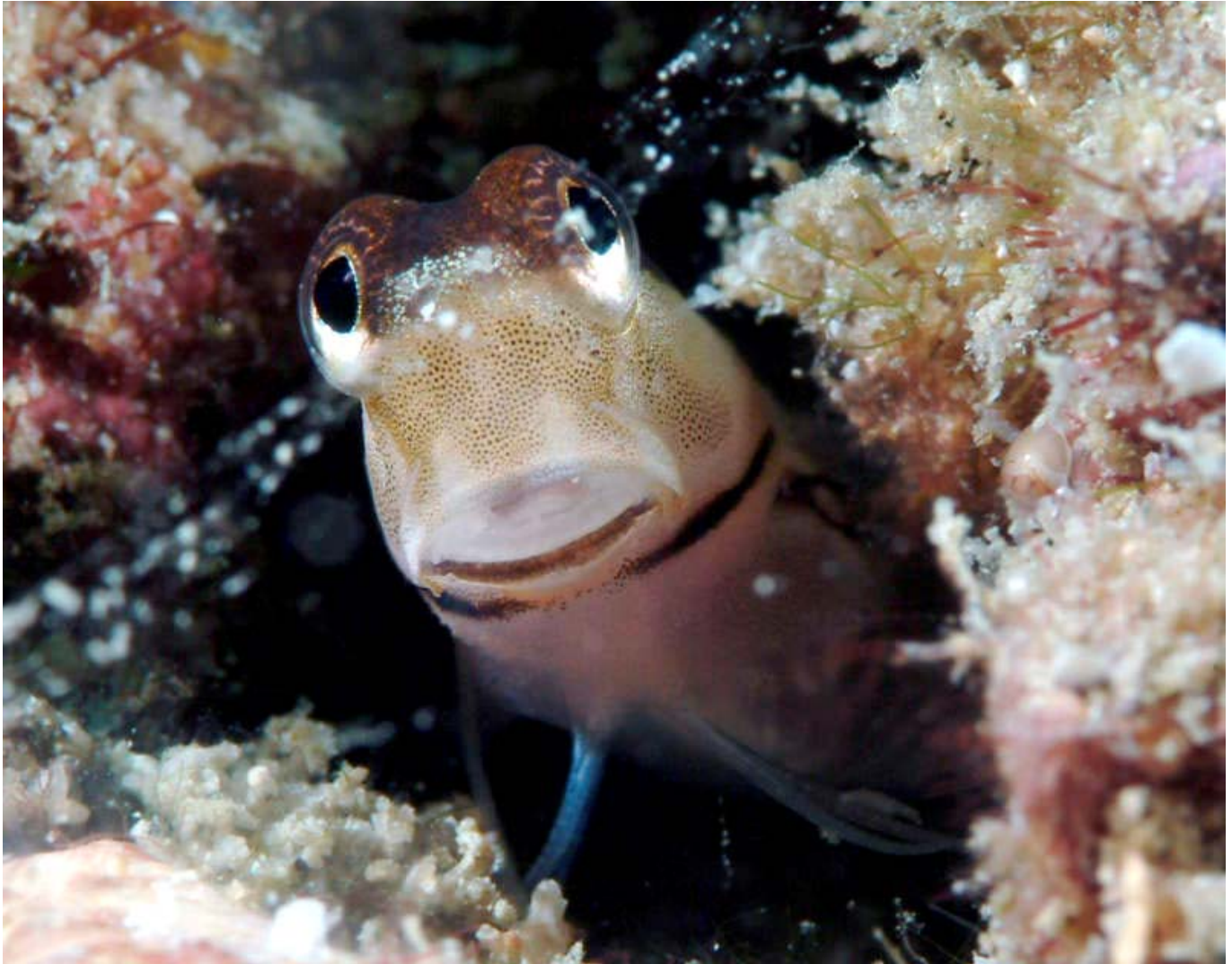
Silvertip shark, New Hanover Island

⁴ The Nature Company Guides, "*Sharks and Rays*," Time-Life Books, ISBN 0-7835-4940-7, 1997, p. 169

Fish life is abundant and unusual, especially the little guys:



Blenny, Milne Bay



Blenny, Milne Bay



Harlequin pipefish, Milne Bay

How's this for some spectacular camouflage?



Pipefish (above), leaf (below), Milne Bay



Harlequin pipefish, Milne Bay

And why no camouflage on this one?



Harlequin pipefish, Milne Bay



Pipefish

I've made several thousand photos of anemone fish. They are irresistible. This is probably my favorite:



Anemone fish, Milne Bay



Toadfish, Milne Bay



Santa Claus scorpion fish, Milne Bay



Lionfish face, Milne Bay



Rhinopias, Milne Bay (can you find the eye?)



Frogfish, Milne Bay



Cowfish, Milne Bay



Cowfish, Milne Bay



Two-spot gobies, Milne Bay



School of silver fish, Milne Bay



Saltwater catfish, Milne Bay

After my first **Telita** trip in 1988 I gave a print of this blue fire goby to Bob Halstead. He told me he had it framed and it now sits on his desk. I don't know if he was just shining me, but it was nice of him to say that nonetheless.



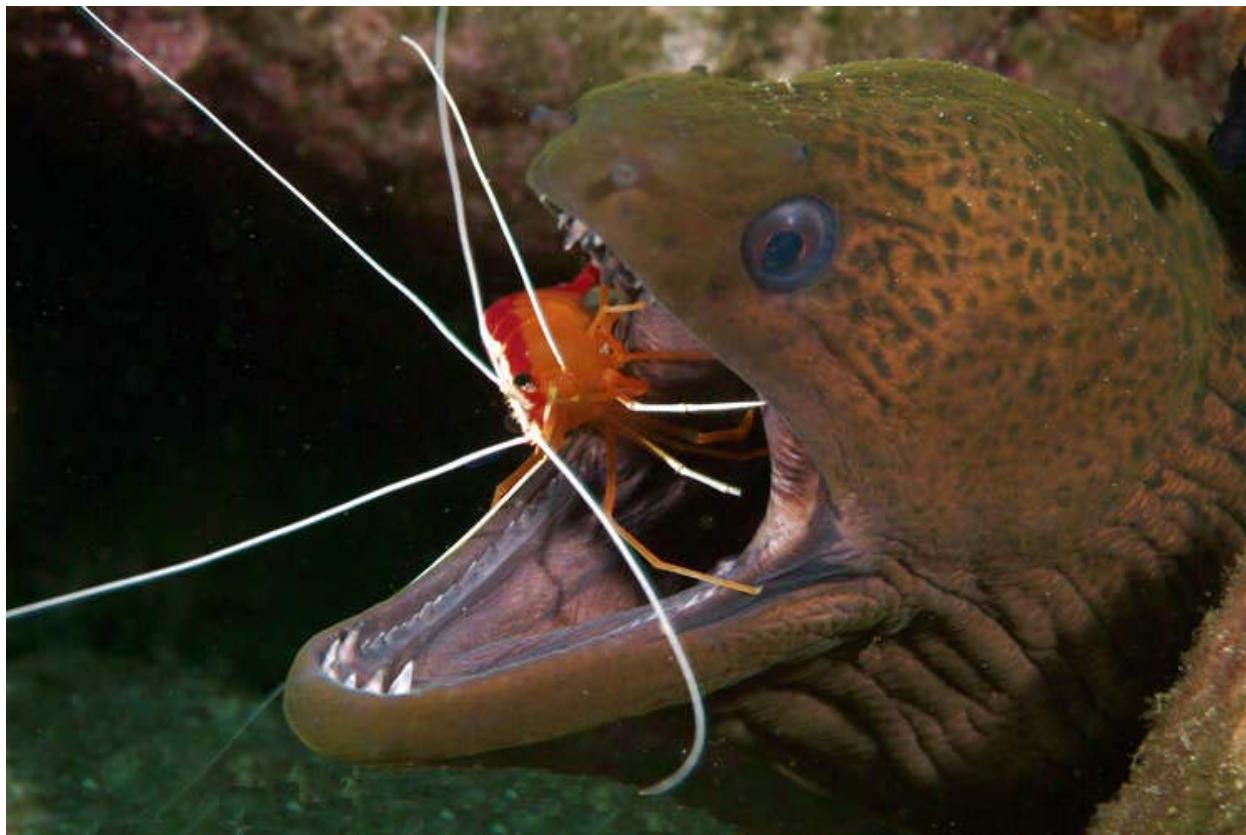
Blue fire goby, New Hanover Island



Snuggling eels, Milne Bay



Eels, Milne Bay



Shrimp cleaning mouth of moray eel, Milne Bay



Cuttlefish with eight perfectly folded tentacles, Milne Bay



Flamboyant cuttlefish, Milne Bay

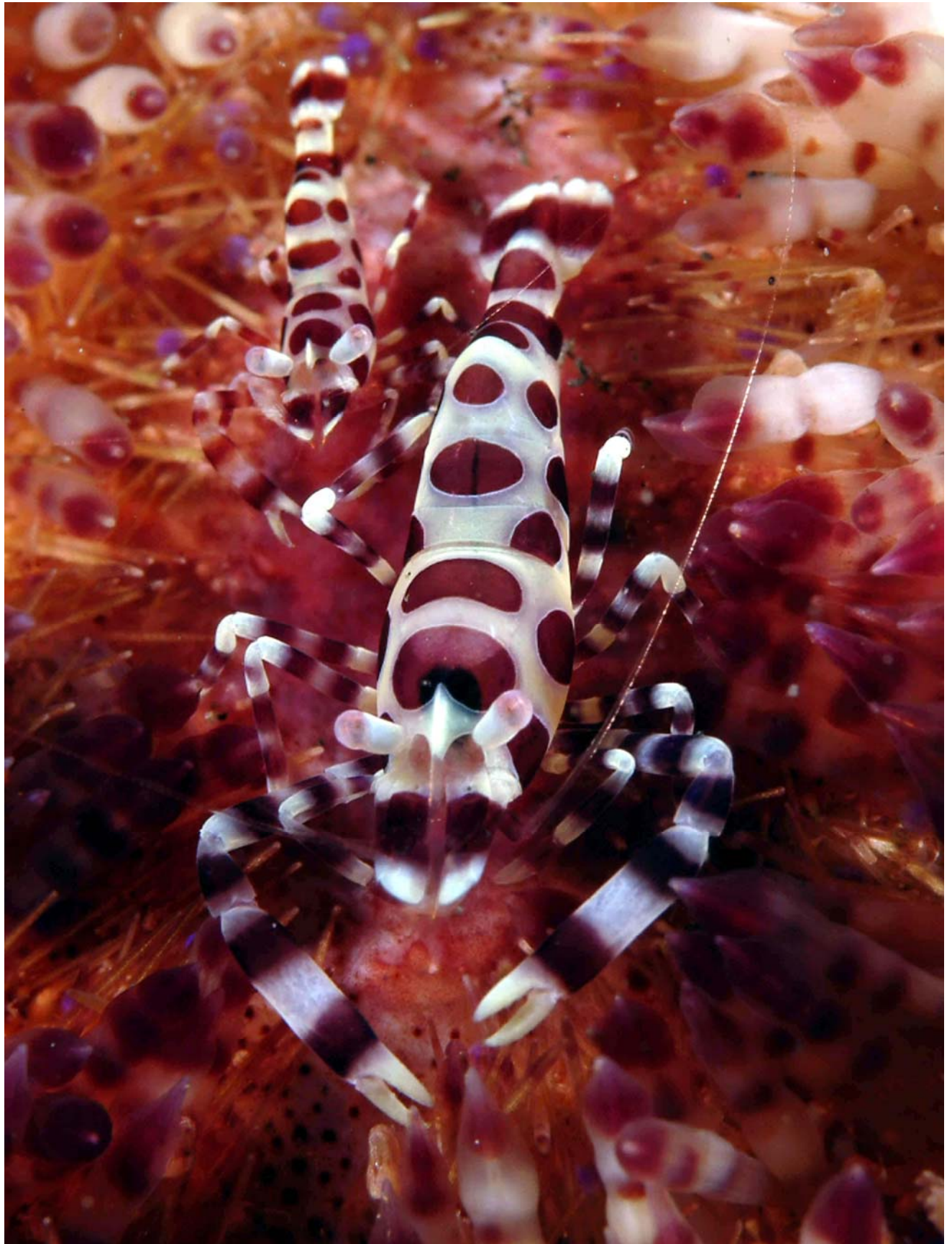
The next two photos are of the same small cuttlefish, made a few seconds apart. Note the color change:



Small cuttlefish (see color change in next photo), Milne Bay



This is the same cuttlefish as the previous photo, trying to fool me by changing color



Pair of Coleman's shrimp on fire urchin, Milne Bay



Imperial shrimp on sea cucumber, Milne Bay



Harlequin shrimp, Milne Bay



Crinoid shrimp, Milne Bay



Porcelain crab on anemone, Milne Bay



Hermit crab, Milne Bay



Imperial shrimp in fold of large nudibranch, Milne Bay

The variety of nudibranchs is astonishing, particularly at the muck divesites in Milne Bay. Here is the large nudibranch photographed with the Imperial shrimp in the previous photo:



Large nudibranch (about a foot long) from previous photo



Nudibranch, Milne Bay



Nudibranch, Milne Bay



Peekaboo nudibranch, Milne Bay



Nudibranch with Imperial shrimp, Milne Bay



Nudibranch, Milne Bay



Nudibranch, Milne Bay



Nudibranch, Milne Bay



Nudibranch, Milne Bay



Nudibranch, Milne Bay



Nudibranch, Milne Bay



Nudibranch, Milne Bay



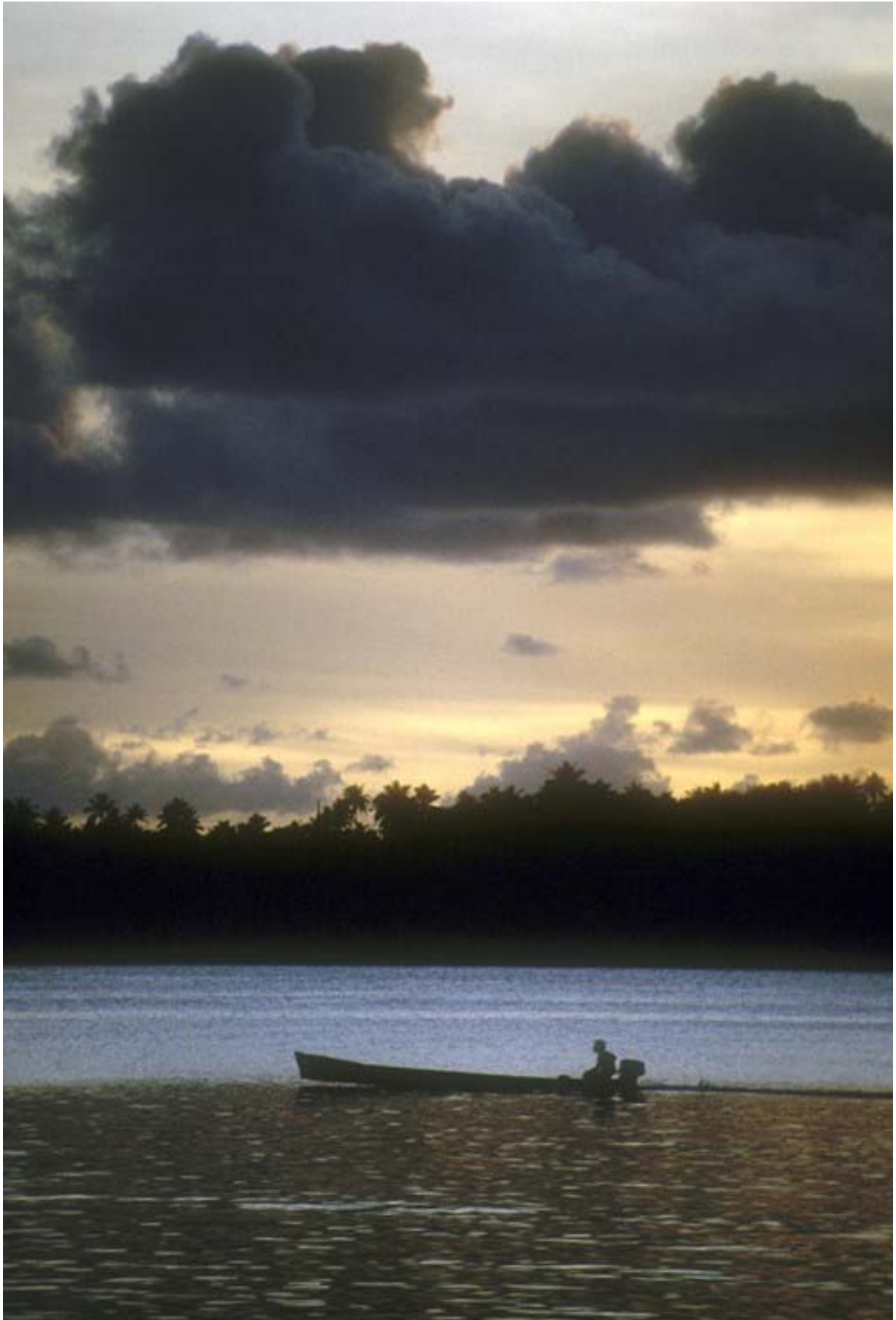
Nudibranch, Milne Bay

A highlight of the New Hanover Island **Telita** trips was the opportunity to photograph a living fossil, the chambered nautilus. At a known location midway through the trip, in the late afternoon the crew drops a baited trap to a depth of about 800 feet. When they haul it up in the morning, it almost always contains several live nautiluses. The unique design of the nautilus shell makes them resistant to the huge pressure change. It does this by removing water from the shell by osmosis, creating a vacuum inside. Thus there are no expanding gases inside the shell on the way up from 800 fsw, and structurally the shell resists the pressure at depth. Or so they say. It seems to be true, however, because I have seen it twice now and the animals do not seem to be affected. Each diver pair takes at least one animal with them down to about 60 fsw, has their photographic way with them, then releases them and watches them wiggle their way down to deep water again. It is a great experience and produces some good images of a rare animal:



Chambered nautilus, New Hanover Island

Papua New Guinea is truly the ***last place on earth***.....



Sunset, Kavieng, New Hanover Island

