

IMAGES OF TAÑON STRAIT





ON THE COVER

(Top to bottom)

Dolphins at play in Bais Bay

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA

Diver and sea cucumbers in Moalboal

PHOTO BY GUTSY TUASON

Reef gleaner in Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY OGGIE RAMOS

(Back cover)

Fishing is in the soul of the Visayans

PHOTO BY FERDINAND EDRALIN

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TAÑON STRAIT

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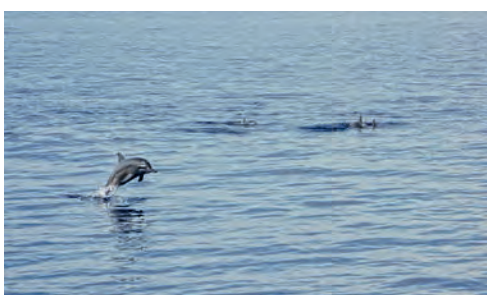
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A MESSAGE OF THANKS



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A PHOTO SAFARI

In the early morning calm, lone fishers in outrigger bancas cast their hooks silently into the water as a faint yellow light starts to form a thin line on the horizon. Slowly, orange and pink streaks emerge in the sky, and women start staking their spots in the shallows, loading their pails with shells for the day's meal. Their serenity is soothing, a gentle reminder of the simple life that endures in forgotten shores.

For six days in May, a group of nature and news photographers had the chance to capture these scenes during a photo safari organized by Oceana Philippines. The expedition is part of our campaign to restore the beauty and bounty of Tañon Strait, the largest marine protected area in the Philippines.

From Bantayan island in the north to Bais bay in the south, we documented remnants of the fisheries boom that once dominated the lives of people in the central Visayas: a dried fish market in Santa Fe, clusters of fishing boats around Pescador island, fishers emptying their nets on the shore. Yet, the signs of creeping modernization were everywhere: tour operators taking over what was once the pristine stretch of Panagsama beach, visitors turning their backs instead of facing the

playful dolphins so they could get selfies, business establishments and roads right on the very edge of the coastline.

It is easy to get disheartened in the face of dwindling fish catch, irresponsible practices, and unethical investments. But all is not lost. Across the strait, local communities are doing their share in working towards positive change. Villagers in Aloguinsan are reviving their mangrove river that flows out to the sea. A resort owner in Moalboal is showcasing an eco-friendly enterprise that employs local townsfolk yearround. The local government of Bindoy makes use of a ridge-to-reef approach that has produced results in rehabilitating ecosystems.

Through this book, it is our sincere hope that the people of Tañon Strait would become more aware about what they stand to lose if destructive projects persist in their waters and shores. There is a lot more to gain from working together in restoring habitats and getting marine harvests to sustainable levels. It is not yet too late to bring back the soul of Tañon Strait. ■

YASMIN ARQUIZA

Communications Director

Oceana Philippines



A young boy in a blue shirt and dark shorts is walking through shallow water, creating ripples. In the background, several traditional boats with blue awnings are anchored on the water. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, indicating sunset or sunrise.

CHAPTER 1

SONG OF THE FISHERMAN

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA

Fishing is in the soul of the Visayans.

Their bamboo outriggers, flapping listlessly on the water, begin to take shape at first light upon the sea. They are the same kind of boats used for many generations, hauling in the harvest from below, filling up the nets on lucky days. There are the lonely boats, too, of solitary fishermen with their hook-and-line in their wooden *bancas*, a smaller version of the motorized ones commonly seen on the coast.

The fishes don't come to the bait as often as they did many years ago. Waiting until the end of the day, as night consumes the sea, the fishermen tap their paddles on the fragile hull, a monotonous pleading for any offering from under the water.

On Bantayan island, in northern Cebu, the *bancas* are parked ashore. Each one has a name — usually a woman's or something alluding to a woman, or a familiar place.

This island was once the center of fishing, there at the top of Tañon Strait. Today it is popular for tourism, flocks of visitors coming for the holiday season. They take the three-hour bus ride from the city of Cebu, and then a ferry that drops anchor on the village of Santa Fe.

From afar one could see the fishermen's enclave, their humble dwellings clustered at the edge of the shoreline, after the rows of resorts. Their children play in the sand, their wives sell ►





Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY OGGIE RAMOS





Full moon in Santa Fe,
Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY FERDINAND EDRALIN

Fishermen's children
in Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY TONEE DESPOJO





food to the tourists. It is their son's turn to learn how to fish, to use the gill net properly for a good catch. Their identical but colorful *bancas* carry similar kerosene lamps fashioned out of empty rum bottles, which is their light as they make their way out to the dark.

In early May, the full moon hung over the island, glimmering on the *bancas*, as if to remind us of history, what fortune it had. Bantayan tells us what it means to the Visayas, one of the corners of many islands around which the seas are abundant.

Tañon strait runs through the corridor between Cebu and Negros, the water flowing to Bohol, sliding by Leyte and Samar. Visayas is a patch of islands that constitute major fishing grounds, one of them Tañon Strait. It is the largest protected marine area in the country, bigger than the Tubbataha Reef in the middle of the Sulu Sea.

These waters flaunted its wealth many decades ago; in those days Bantayan's harbor was awash with fishing vessels, unloading their bounty onto the market that had all kinds of fish for sale. It still lives up to its name, somewhat: if you're looking for the best *danggit*, this is where you can find it. There is a hint of nostalgia standing by the harbor, a vestige of the colonial Spanish days judging from the main town boasting of its ringed plaza and a centuries-old cathedral made of squared coral stones. ►



**Playing football
in Madrideojos,
Bantayan Island**

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA





Dried fish market in Bantayan

PHOTO BY FERDINAND EDRALIN

The strait, facing down from Bantayan's Santa Fe village, reached its peak in marine catch sometime in the 1990s — when it seemed fishermen could not have enough of it and kept wanting for more. Commercial fishing was at its heyday, and there was no realization that such bounty could get exhausted.

When you talk to ordinary fishermen these days, they will tell you about the demise of their livelihood. They will remember what it was like to haul kilos upon kilos of fish they could sell at the market and put on their table for their children. In one morning, they could earn enough to see the day through.

That has changed so drastically. Now, they have to keep trying until the sun sinks into the horizon, and still they would try some more even in the dark just to toil for a few kilos in small buckets. When they return to shore, the children will be waiting for leftovers, even for scraps of fish, if at all there are any. ►



Children waiting for scrap fish from returning fishermen in Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY TONÉE DESPOJO



Basket of dried salmollete fish

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA



Dried fish market in Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA



**Drying fish
in Bantayan Island**

PHOTO BY TONEE DESPOJO



**Gathering shells in Santa Fe,
Bantayan Island**

PHOTO BY CANDEZE MONGAYA



PHOTO BY TONEE DESPOJO



Nowadays, the fishermen of Bantayan stay mostly on the fringes. They had their time, but they carry on the trade of their ancestors. The Visayas wouldn't be what it is without the communities of fisherfolk. Many of them are classified as "municipal fishers" who are limited by their capacity to fish only as far out as 15 kilometers from the coast they inhabit, in their *bancas* weighing not more than three tons. There are more than 26,000 of them in Tañon Strait, their villages lined on the coasts.

When there's so little out there to catch, they join the trawlers or massive outriggers that undertake days of expedition in the open seas, with more sophisticated gear. There's a ban on large-scale fishing in the strait to give the seas a breathing space, allowing them to recuperate from the rampant fishing that bred greed for profit. But that doesn't always stop commercial fishers from roaming wherever they please, in parts where there are still some fish left.

The fishermen have learned to deal with tourism on Bantayan. We see them as soon as we settle in a resort designed out of container vans, a new fad in architecture whose cool colors blend with the shade of sand. ►





Fishing boat in
northern Tañon Strait

PHOTO BY OGGIE RAMOS





PHOTO BY FERDINAND EDRA PIN

The attraction of Bantayan is that it is neither upscale nor too kitsch. That a fishermen's village lay beside our rooms exemplifies the authenticity of the island — it is part of the landscape. They are there when we take our walks on the beach. They welcome us. They give us a glimpse of their lives as we watch them pull in the net toward the shore.

It is in places such as Bantayan where one has to be more conscious of nature. Here is where we want our surroundings protected, pristine, and unsullied by commercialism. Tourism has to take responsibility in making the local people aware of the physical changes around them.

We take a motorboat to an islet called Virgin. It is as breathtaking as our image of a paradise — fine white sand, clear sparkling water in the color of lime, picnic huts in native motifs. There are many corners in our country where we feel at home, away from the pressures of urban life, and here, we say, this is ours, we must keep it in its original form.

We swim, we snorkel, we take our lunch of grilled fish and steamed rice, and remember it for a simple day that does not always happen ►

Virgin Island in northern Tañon Strait

PHOTOS BY FERDZ DECENA







Lighthouse in Madridejos,
Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA





PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA

Reef gleaning in Madrideojos,
Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY OGGIE RAMOS





Flying kites in Madridejos town, Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA



PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA

in our daily chores. We tell others to lower the volume of their techno music, because quiet comes with nature.

What we want to hear is the laughter of children. It is in Lawis, meaning the northern tip in the local language, where we see them playing with kites by the lighthouse of Madridejos. The ageing structure symbolizes where Bantayan stands on the map of the Visayas. Many have come this way in the artery of our archipelago.

The lighthouse is no longer the beacon that it used to be, but the children, they believe in the innocence of playing, running across a bridge for a future set in the amazing hue of the yellow-orange streaks in the horizon. ►

**Gathering shellfish
in Santa Fe,
Bantayan island**

PHOTO BY OGGIE RAMOS









Walkway and lighthouse in
Madririjos, Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA

How many stories can the fishermen tell us
on the night of a full moon?

They are quiet in their village tonight, and
there is only one white *banca* swaying in our
view. The light of the moon, like a lamp in the
sky, gives us a story of the solitary *banca*.

The silence is broken by the call of a vendor
selling *balut* and *chicharon*, his drone melding
with the night, echoing in the evening breeze.
He stops by a group of teenagers huddled by
the beach, a coven getting ready to serenade the
brilliant moon in the night. *Balut* and *chicharon*
would go well with their beer.

The fishermen of the Visayas would do that
too, for a ritual: gather together after a long day
searching for a good catch, drinking their *tuba*,
taking turns with swigs of it, while singing the
kundiman, their love songs for the woman they
love most — the sea. ■

Santa Fe, Bantayan Island

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA





CHAPTER 2

MANGROVE HARVEST





PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA



PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA



PHOTO BY OGGIE RAMOS

There is a charming secret in the small town of Aloguinsan, by the mid-section of Cebu province. The mayor's office has given the fishers a chance for another take on their livelihood. They moonlight as tour guides on a river cruise, one that goes through their hamlet of 350 hectares called Bojo.

The tour promises to be life changing — that's what the sign says along the path leading to the river. There, in a clearing before the

mouth of the mangrove forest, is a face of transformation. The villagers in their festive outfits welcome us with folk songs of the Visayas. They adorn us with hand-made leis and offer a fresh drink of lemongrass juice. This greeting is a preamble to what we're about to see: their own life-changing experience to give value to what is theirs, right here in the forest they had once taken for granted.

We hop into the fishermen's *bancas*, leading us to a relaxing glide on the river cutting through the mangroves. They know by heart how many ►





Entering the Forest
of the Lost Monkeys

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA



PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA







Mangrove flower

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA





Making handicrafts for visitors

PHOTOS BY FERDZ DECENA

species of mangroves this forest has (22) and how many species of birds are nesting among the trees (61).

The fishers have come to learn what is now precious to them. After having lived in poverty because of their rapidly dwindling marine catch, a new possibility has opened for them and their families. One of them says — with a clear tone of irony — that mangroves had meant nothing to them before. They had abused it, cutting down the wood to be used for cooking or to be sold to bakery owners for their ovens. They

had no use for the elongated seedlings called propagules, shaped like cigars that drift in the high tide, languishing among the water debris and driftwood on the shores. They had no idea that life for most of the marine creatures begins among the tangled roots of the mangroves, dipped in the seashore where the propagules, when they drop like spears in the low marsh, reproduce. They did not know that mangrove trees, when they grow high and strong to the size of a forest, become the sentinels between water and land, a buffer against wild climate that may come without warning. ►



River tour in the mangrove forest

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA





Bojo River in Aloguinsan, Cebu

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA



The river tour through the mangroves is short and quaint, running more than a kilometer until it reaches a narrow opening to the Tañon Strait. It's an invisible gate between the two gorges, fishers say, according to a local legend about a forest of lost monkeys.

The strait expands to a color of grey, an abrupt change from the greenish river. Across the sea is the island of Negros, its famous and grand Mt. Kanlaon facing us.

From here it may be easy for the villagers of Bojo to understand that in their little enclave, they can make a difference in their lives when they are in harmony with what surrounds them. They had to learn the intricacies of the ecosystem, with the help of their local government unit that was conscious of the environment.

For the fishers, the mangroves had obstructed their view when they had been so used to the wide berth of the sea. Back then, they had not realized it was there to protect them, and more so, to help them.

They had to be told; they had to see it to believe it. The mangroves, from now on, are their allies.

The women from one village in Bantayan, for example, could recite a list of the species after they were taught about the importance of mangroves — that it is where fishes and shells ►



Mangrove forest in Bindoy, Negros Oriental

PHOTO BY TONEE DESPOJO

are bred. They would know what is best to have by their backyard, or what would hold the shores against the winds, storms, and floods.

In southern Negros, the mayor of Bindoy municipality has been at the forefront in keeping the mangroves safe from any kind of destruction. Mayor Valente Yap has linked the mangroves to the seagrass and on to the corals, all of them connected to the beauty of evolution that transpires under the sea. He shakes his head in recalling what it was like in the late 1990s

when there was hardly any fish left, all gone from the most vicious form of fishing, fishermen resorting to cyanide poison and dynamite explosion. The fishermen didn't understand then what he was up to, and the mayor had to show them that the source of their livelihood, of their very being, was dangerously at stake.

The mangroves, for a start, had to grow again unharmed, and the rest would follow.

After many years of vigilant guarding, the



Bindoy mangrove forest and beach in Negros Oriental

PHOTO BY TONEE DESPOJO

coastal forests are thriving again. On weekends, the families of Bindoy gather by the mangroves, swimming in the shallow pools for leisure, among the gnarled roots. It is where they go for their picnics. At times it is also where they collect their food for supper — small fish, clams, crabs. In what seems like a miracle, they have discovered that their riches could be found there.

Like the fishers living by the Bojo River in Cebu, here in Bindoy life can change when

people learn to respect what nature has given them. The municipality is proud to report that since its protected zone was put in place in 2012, it has had more coral cover and a higher percentage of fish biomass. The number of species has increased, and the catch rate has gone up from two kilos to five kilos at the latest count.

In Negros, the mangroves stand out in a reserve. Talabong Mangrove Forest harbors 13 species in the bay of Bais, off Dumaguete City. ►





Bindoy mangrove forest

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA





PHOTO BY FERDINAND EDRALIN



**Mangrove walk in
Bais Bay**

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA







Mangrove walk along
Bais Bay

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA



Dried up mangrove forest

PHOTO BY OGGIE RAMOS

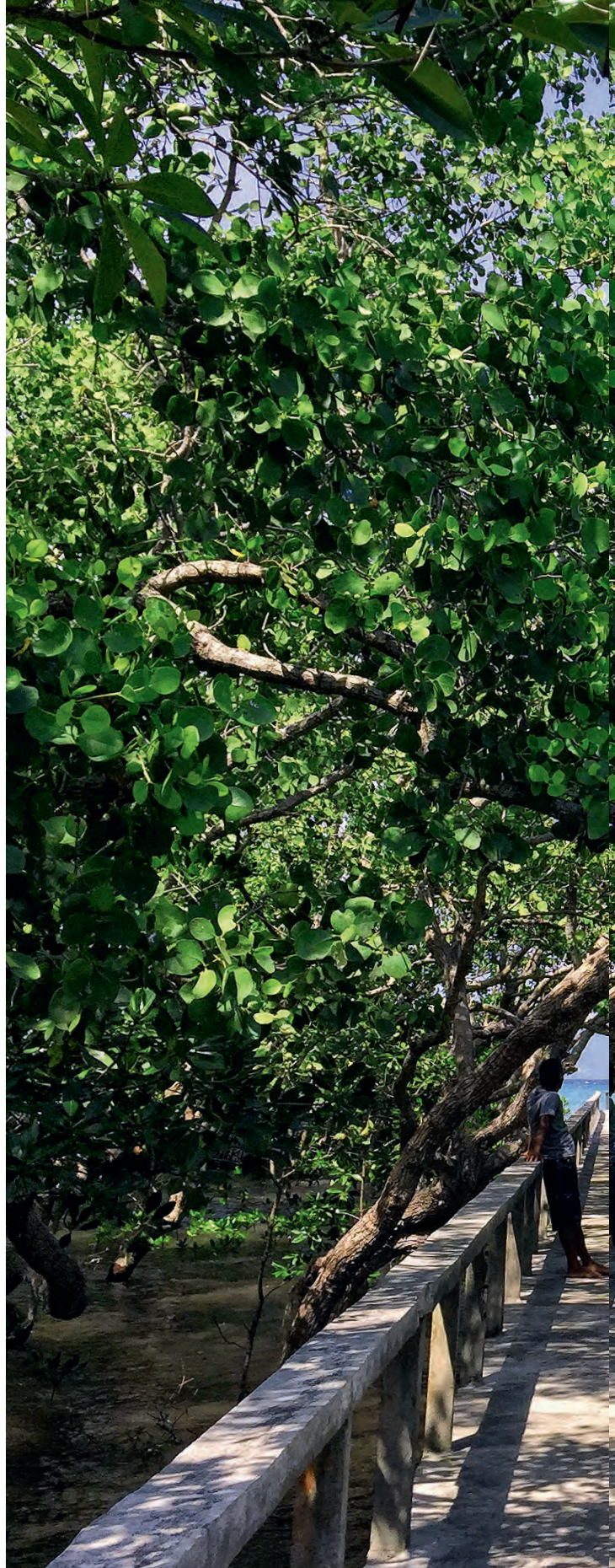


The sprawling forest is near the Manjuyod sand bar. Local residents built a walkway for the benefit of tourists, with platforms for bird watching as well.

The strait itself holds 36 species in 5,000 hectares of coastal forests, a hefty number considering that the entire country has nearly half of the world's 70 species of mangroves. Here, people see the wealth of Tañon Strait, and there's more to be done to keep it from slipping away. ■

Talabong Mangrove forest

PHOTO BY DANNY OCAMPO







CHAPTER 3

A SEA

OF DOLPHINS

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA

The show starts early in the morning. That's when the spinners break out of the silvery bay of Bais, others giving chase alongside our dive boat. We yelp and scream and lie flat on the bow to see them closer, these wonderful dolphins we've come for.

One tourist boat tries to cut our path, envious that clusters of the cetaceans — whose species have favored this part of the bay — play with us. The spotter atop our outrigger, on the other hand, is setting his binoculars on the other boat, which is carrying women in bikinis. Tour operators make a living out of ferrying guests from Dumaguete City, who pay handsome money to see one of the wonders of Tañon Strait.

But it is clear, this Saturday morning in May as we remember it, the dolphins are drawn to us. And so we stay put, looking out again for more of them to come our way.

They appear in groups of four or six; first you see their dorsal fins afar, like sharp knife wedges cutting through the waves, and we cheer. No sooner than a few seconds and they are running near our boat. We are breathless seeing them so close, their snouts almost kissing the hull of our 120-foot dive boat. Oh, if only we could touch them and stroke their tails from where we are ►

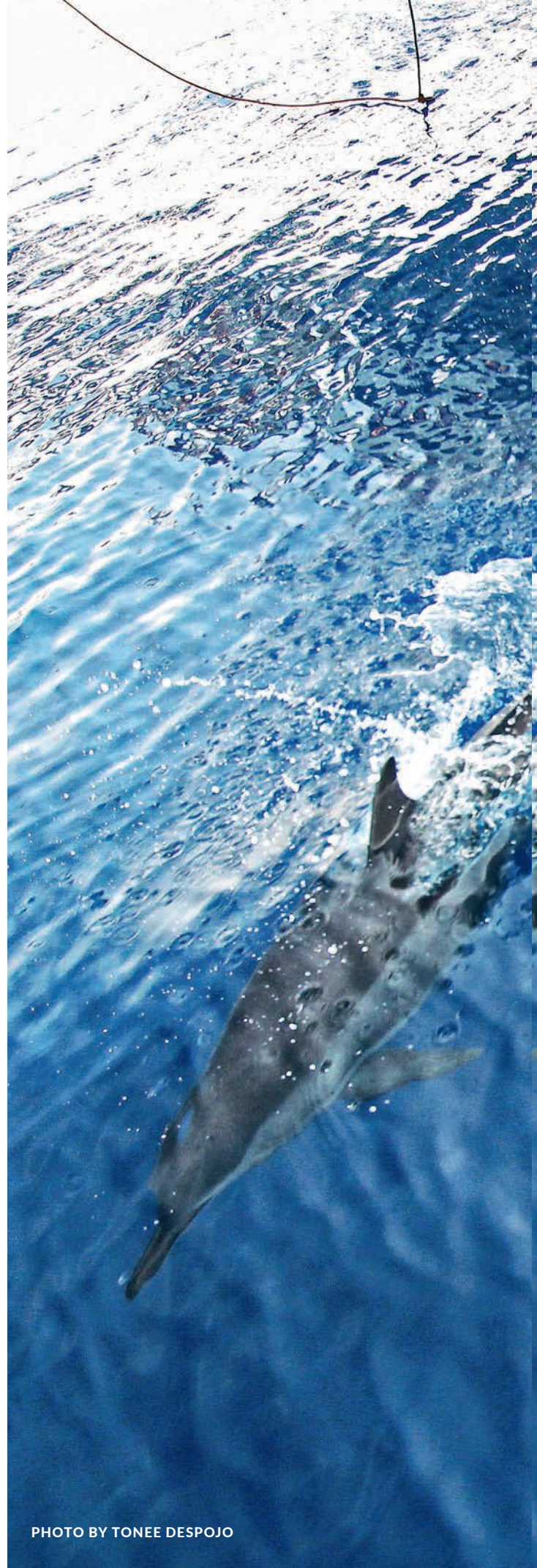
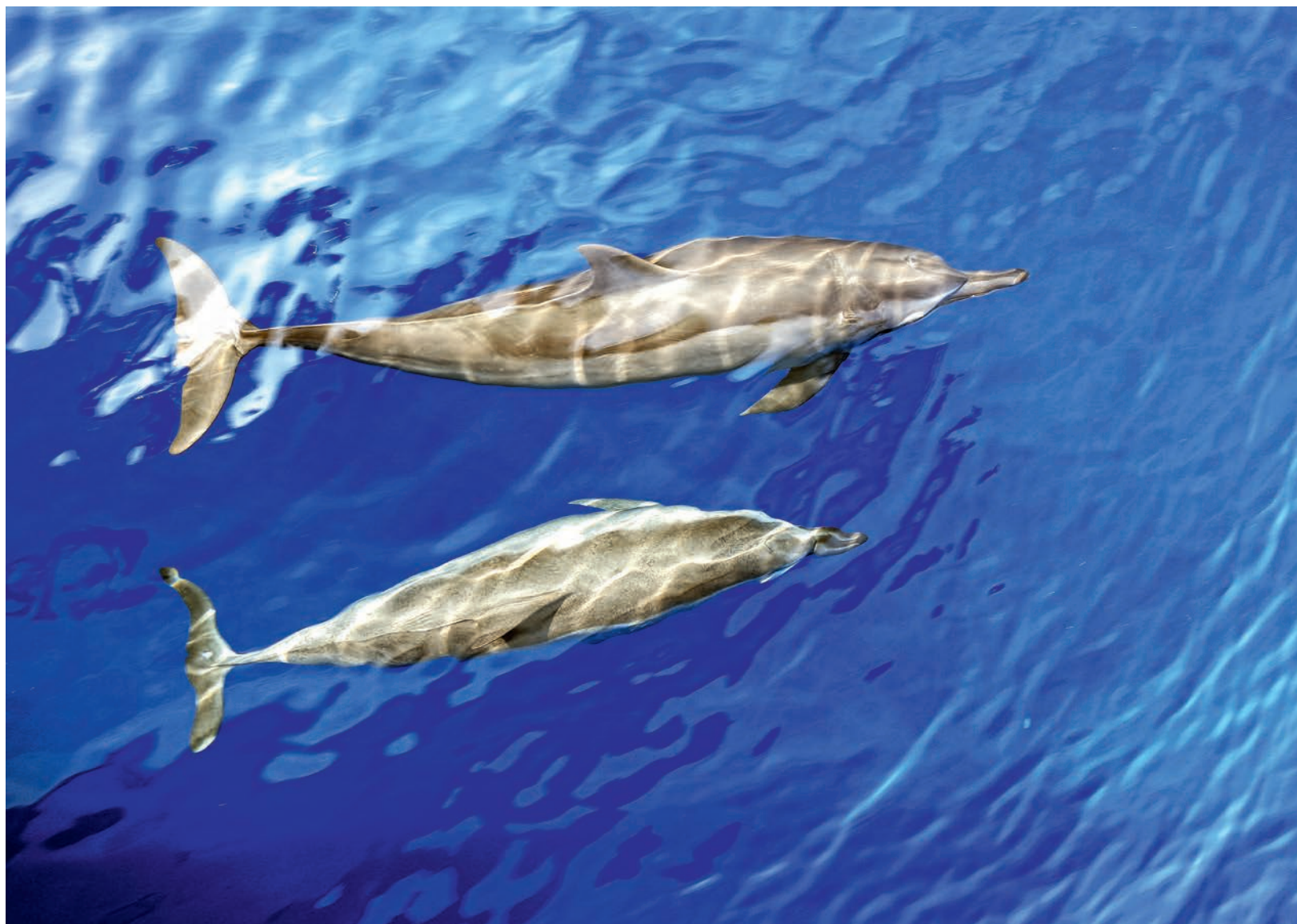


PHOTO BY TONEE DESPOJO





PHOTOS BY CANDEZE MONGAYA



on the bow, taking shots of the playful dolphins with our cameras!

For a good deal of the morning, the intense summer heat rising to 40 Celsius, we take this gift as the culmination of everything: we are about to finish a week-long photo safari in Tañon Strait that started from the northern tip of Cebu, now ending in the south on the side of Negros. We went from the history of fishing in Bantayan to the mangroves in Aloguinsan, to a diving adventure in Moalboal. Here we are, on the last leg of the trip. The night before, we

moored on Mantalip Reef by a ranger station, praying the dolphins would be there for us when the next day brings us to Bais.

It is here on Tañon Strait where more than half of the 27 species of dolphins and whales in the entire country are found. They stay here because of the sea's depth, a haven under which they roam up and down the narrow marine corridor between the Bohol and Visayas seas.

The spinner dolphins are the superstars, as well as the spotted ones. There are also the rare ►

A photograph of a ranger station on a reef at sunset. The station is a small, elevated structure with a concrete base and a metal railing. It is situated on a rocky reef with green algae. The ocean is calm, and the sky is filled with soft, pink and orange clouds. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow over the scene. A thin rope or cable runs across the water from the station towards the left.

Ranger station
on Mantalip Reef,
Bindoy in Negros
Oriental

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA





**Frogfish and sardine
shoal in Moalboal**

PHOTO BY GUTSY TUASON



whales that scuba divers would do anything to see, such as the shy dwarf sperm and the pygmy killer. The divers would be doubly lucky if they catch sight of the mythical *dugong*, the sea cow that is one of the most critically endangered mammals in the Philippines.

Tañon has more of its treasures beneath the water, what with all its pelagic and reef fishes: the stuff of grouper, snapper, parrotfish, tuna, and others. One diver in our team caught a picture of a frogfish in the depths off Moalboal, which is known to be one of Cebu's best dive sites.

A sanctuary nearby is resplendent with a coral garden, their grayish and reddish colors and linear and geometric shapes plastered on rock walls in seemingly Art Deco style. Under the water, the scenery is reminiscent of the landscape above the surface, as if there are museums in the vast floor beds of the sea.

Other parts are too bleak; the ruins of destructive fishing have left the corals shattered and dead. The dive master guides visitors to the surviving ones, showing us the tiny schools of fish that give hope to this amazing universe.

Tañon's coral reef, put together, covers a size of almost 19,000 hectares. They shelter about 70 species of fish and 20 species of crustaceans.

Off the public beach of Panagsama, the ones leading the show are the sardines at their prime ►



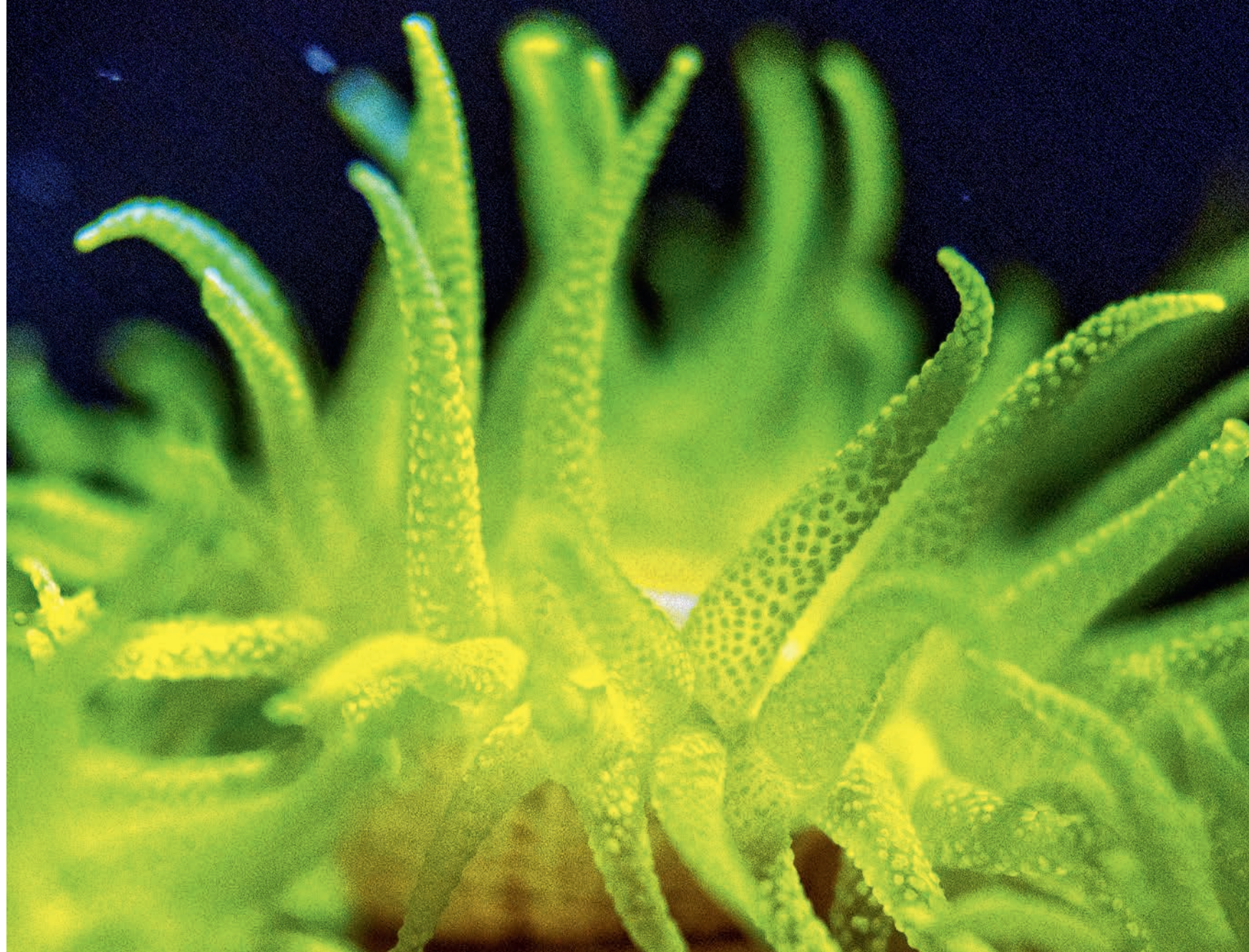


PHOTO BY FERDINAND EDRALIN



**View from Mantalip
ranger station in
Bindoy, Negros
Oriental**

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA



Sea anemone

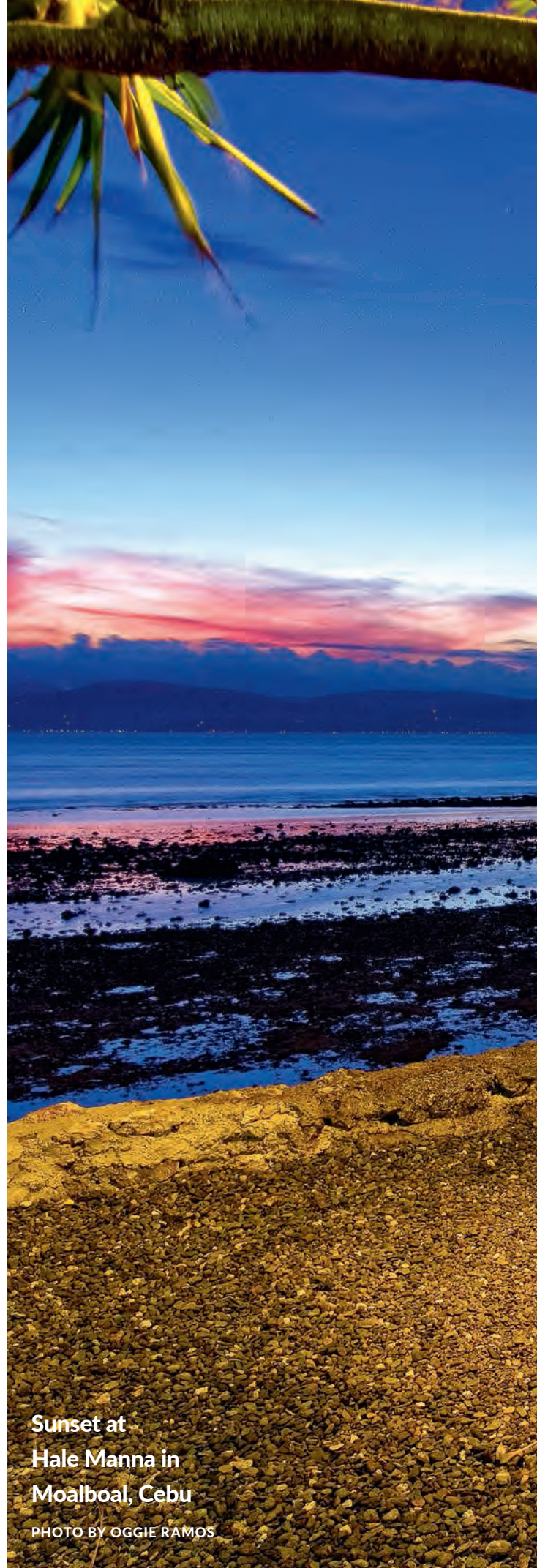
PHOTO BY FERDINAND EDRALIN

in spawning. They dance here and there even in the murky water filled with plankton, in the shadow of business establishments that have encroached on the shoreline.

Our group of divers and photographers had boarded the dive boat in Moalboal, from a coastal resort that is a place of good energy, owned by a widow who had lived in Hawaii. There were rocking chairs and lounging beds facing the shore, an inspiration point looking out to the future of the strait. On a low tide, the sun plunged perfectly on the horizon, beyond the raft bobbling ahead. We had pangs about leaving, because it seemed just so right and so zen being there, but then we were also looking forward to seeing the dolphins in Bais.

Going south of the marine corridor, which runs a length of 160 kilometers and spreading as wide as 27 kilometers, we had stopped to stay the night at a solitary ranger station that keeps watch in the area. Mantalip Reef is a short distance from the shore of Bindoy's mangroves and the lonely, concrete structure was the only sign of vigilance against poachers.

A couple of local fishermen joined the watchers to help keep them awake, their voices trading common stories keeping us up all night as well. The moon was starting to wane and the breeze swept through the veranda where we had decided to put the mattress on tabletops to have the fresh air with us, instead of staying in the stuffy rooms. ►



Sunset at
Hale Manna in
Moalboal, Cebu

PHOTO BY OGGIE RAMOS



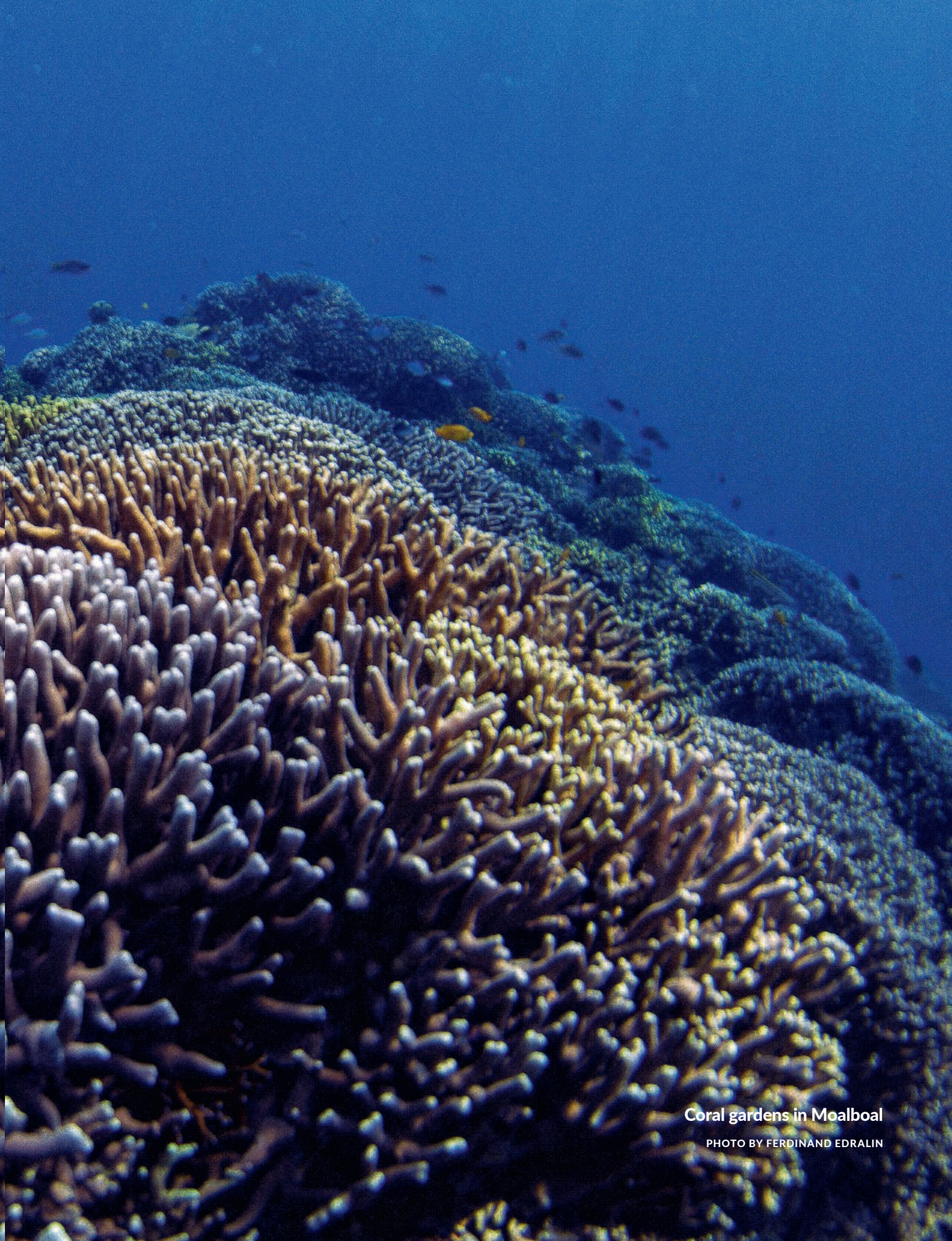




Pescador island in
Moalboal, Cebu

PHOTO BY FERDINAND EDRALIN





Coral gardens in Moalboal

PHOTO BY FERDINAND EDRALIN



**Synaptid sea
cucumbers cling to
corals in Moalboal,
Cebu**

PHOTO BY GUTSY TUASON



There was nothing else out there. Tañon was in a hush. How does one protect this marine area, the size of about 521,000 hectares? As it were, the lone watch station in Mantalip seemed like the only voice in the wilderness trying to stop illegal fishing and other wrongdoings.

In Mantalip, the day before our dolphin watch, we'd gone underwater to check on the corals. They were breathing a fresh life because of attempts to protect them. At twilight we went diving over what looked like a cabbage field, the corals in the shape of the leaves with all kinds of fishes gathered in various schools. We stayed down for as long as we could, circling the swath of corals, observing their shapes, the sticks and the foams, the soft and hard ones, the playground of fishes playing hide-and-seek with us.

Underwater, the divers too play a game of producing a stream of bubbles by rubbing their fists together, thrilled by the experience of being below the sea level. Normally we count the species, seek what is strange and new, and if the strait will carry on with its rebirthing, there will be more in its vast coral gardens that we expect to grow again in due time.

The bay of Bais offers a berth of things to see, a friendly preview of learning more about the Tañon Strait. There are better chances for marine life to thrive in no-fishing zones, ►





Divers and sardine shoal in
Moalboal, Cebu

PHOTO BY FERDINAND EDRALIN





Green sea turtle in Moalboal, Cebu

PHOTO BY GUTSY TUASON

giving them the chance to breed after too much commercial harvesting.

Recently, environmentalists have launched a call to save the Tañon Strait, at last putting into action what has been written on paper since 1998, when the strait was declared a protected seascape. After 17 years of seeing the rules broken, people allowing harm in many ways and disregarding their future, conservationists have resolved to take a better track, pushing for improved management. Almost 300 coastal villages and more than one million people from Cebu and Negros depend on it.

Overall it was the dolphins that left us in a state of bliss, nearing the end of our tour. We are truly lucky having them come to us, to be with us long enough to keep the memory of this first safari. We hope they stay protected, as with the whales and the sharks and all the sea animals out there. We know it isn't always safe for them. The owner of the dive boat knows what goes on in the wilds of the sea; he has heard of fishermen resorting to shark hunting when they need to make more money, finding every means to fill their nets.

As the dolphins went their way back into the deep, we decide to take a stroll on the mangrove forest nearby, thinking it is going to take only a few minutes to get there. We are wrong: it has taken us almost an hour on a Saturn rubber boat from our dive boat that can't cross the shallows. ►





Striped eel catfish in Moalboal reef

PHOTO BY GUTSY TUASON





Moalboal, Cebu

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA





Low tide at sunset in Hale
Manna, Moalboal

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA



Manjuyod sandbar in Negros Oriental

PHOTO BY FERDZ DECENA

The noonday sun is piercing us. The mangroves are parched, due to a heat wave this summer. It's empty, with only the chirping of a few sunbirds keeping us company. The trees' tangled roots are like sculptures of nature, slender branches rising to a canopy of leaves.

At day's end, we make our way toward the nearest city, in Dumaguete, now a major tourist destination in this part of the western Visayas. The expedition is over and we treat ourselves to a nice dinner in one of the oldest restaurants in this university town.

Some of us wander off, venturing towards the outdoor food stalls by the boulevard. They're selling a local version of tempura skewered with wooden sticks. When we ask what kind of fish it is, we are told they don't quite know, that it could be the *barla* fish. Or it might be shark.

That's enough to lose one's appetite. Shark hunting — could it be true, as the owner of the dive boat had told us? If it is, this simply means there's still a long way to go in protecting Tañon Strait. ■



**Dive boat and
Mantalip reef station**

PHOTO BY OGGIE RAMOS

MOVING FORWARD

The scintillating pages of this photo book on Tañon Strait, a unique and precious natural heritage in the Philippines, are obviously a result of the painstaking collaboration among kindred spirits who love nature for what it is and not just for what it can give us.

The intense and intricate life-and-livelihood images and the compelling words about the status of the country's biggest marine protected area, including stories of inspiring champions, will definitely capture the hearts and minds of our readers and key decision-makers. Hopefully, this material would help embed a growing acknowledgment that each of us must take steps to protect Tañon Strait and our degraded oceans now, and not later. It is a shared responsibility.

Vivid in the memories of our fisherfolk and coastal residents around the strait are that of a bountiful marine life where one need not explore distant shores and suffer the scorching heat, or the upheavals of frequent storms, to have their daily fish catch. For women and their children, gleaning then provided bountiful meals for families who could not otherwise afford to buy the fish, shells, and marine resources in the market.

The declining fish stocks in the once rich fishing ground due to overfishing — as a result of irresponsible and illegal activities, destruction of marine habitats, pollution, unsustainable coastal development and climate change — as well as the demands of a growing population, is a cause for

serious concern. Artisanal fishers in Tañon Strait and elsewhere are the poorest among the poor, an irony considering that we are recognized as an ecological superpower.

But all these challenges can be overcome with a strong alliance among citizens, civil society groups, and government authorities to save our oceans.

The message from Oceana's 'Save the Oceans Feed the World' global campaign resonates deeply in Tañon Strait and in other parts of our archipelago. More than ever, ocean biodiversity and the much-needed restoration of fish stocks require sustainable fisheries management by national and local stakeholders.

This Oceana publication is a way of helping increase the requisite public awareness, and reaching out to our policy makers and communities in general to protect and save Tañon Strait.

In 1968, a well-known conservationist, Baba Dioum, wisely uttered these timeless lines, "In the end, we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught."

This is our Tañon. Let us take care of it. *Atong Tañon Atong Ampingan.* ■

GOLLY ESTENZO RAMOS

*Vice President
Oceana Philippines*

A MESSAGE OF THANKS

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Most of all, we are grateful for the support from the Vibrant Oceans Initiative of Bloomberg Philanthropies that has made our campaigns to protect the marine resources of the Philippines possible. ■





Synaptid sea
cucumber and diver

PHOTO BY GUTSY TUASON

