

Growing pains

Entering its second decade, the young nation of Timor-Leste is trying to forge an identity that melds sustainability with the need to develop its economy

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JUST LIKE MANY OTHER YOUNGSTERS, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste is still working out who it wants to be. It is one of Asia's fastest-growing economies, but has few resources aside from offshore oil and revenue from that will not last forever. There are still visible scars from the years of occupation by Indonesia and the ensuing civil war too, years which led to the total destruction of the country's infrastructure and the depletion of many natural resources.

The young country's need for development offers a rare opportunity to build an economy in which sustainability is ingrained from the start. One of Timor-Leste's leading environmentalists, Demetrio de Carvalho, was a freedom fighter during the struggle for independence. He now leads Haburas Foundation, an environmental organisation advocating sustainability and a return to traditional methods of resource management. "Economic development is a temptation for everyone," says de Carvalho, "but traditional Timorese values are based on



TIMOR'S TIME TO STEP UP
Environmentalists, including Demetrio de Carvalho (smiling, far right) say the locals can be effective partners in policing the reefs.

sustainable management of natural resources through community action."

In 2009, Timor-Leste was one of six signatories (the others being Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines and Solomon Islands) to the Coral Triangle Initiative for Coral Reefs, Fisheries and Food Security. This historic agreement aims to protect the marine resources of the Coral Triangle, an area comparable in size to the Amazon rainforest, which holds more marine biodiversity than anywhere else on Earth.

One of the main goals of the agreement was to establish a network of marine parks throughout the region. Marine parks, if properly managed, protect biodiversity, help restore depleted fish populations and attract tourists, particularly divers and snorkellers. Timor-Leste's only national park, the Nino Konis Santana National Park, is part of Timor-Leste's commitment to the effort.

The park, at the far eastern end of the island, is a paradise for adventure travellers and scuba divers. Its forests are rich with bird life and the reefs abound with schools of fish, marine mammals and sharks. In 2012, the international NGO, Conservation International, conducted an assessment of Timor-Leste's marine biodiversity and found the world's second-highest number of fish species. A single dive on Nino Konis Santana National Park's reefs shows anyone familiar with diving in Southeast Asia that schools of big fish can still exist in the region. Meanwhile, much of the rest of the country has lost its forest cover and fishermen complain that it is harder and harder to catch big fish outside of the protected area.

The park's 55,000 hectares of marine area encircle the eastern tip of Timor island and neighbouring Jaco Island. The narrow channel



between Timor and tiny Jaco is a top dive spot. Big schools of fish, giant clams, reef sharks and a veritable meadow of garden eels thrive there. But there are no diving facilities in Tutuala and Com, the two villages closest to Jaco. Tourists can hire a boat to take them to the reefs, but cannot even rent a mask and snorkel.

According to Simon Jeffery, an Australian business owner in Dili, investment is risky because there is still no land ownership law in Timor-Leste. Added to that, the lack of a decent road or dependable transportation system to the coastal village of Com makes it unlikely that enough tourists would come to make it profitable, especially as, with Timor-Leste using the US dollar as its official currency, everything is more expensive than in neighbouring Indonesia. One of Dili's only two dive shops, Dive Timor Lorosae, has resorted to occasionally offering free trips to divemasters from Indonesia to promote Timor-Leste to their clients.

The primary goals of the park are to preserve biodiversity and ensure food security: tourism is only a secondary objective. Currently the reefs close to Com are showing signs of being overfished with key species like the grazing

parrotfish and predatory groupers nearly gone. Edmundo de Cruz, one of only three fisheries officers in the whole park, and a voluntary park warden, says that there were plenty of fish around Com before Indonesia invaded, then the occupiers introduced dynamite fishing that radically depleted fish stocks.

In an effort to rebuild populations, a zoning system and community management plans have been proposed. The local community in Com set aside several hectares of reef and sea near their village where all fishing is banned. This 'no-take' zone is intended to be a refuge within which fish can grow undisturbed, ultimately producing more fish that can be caught in other areas of the park.

The national park authority has a tiny budget and depends on foreign funds. So for now any enforcement falls to the fishermen themselves. Recently, when a strange boat arrived and started fishing in the no-take zone, the villagers could only watch from the beach because they have no enforcement capacity to apprehend possibly armed intruders. The boat, of unknown origin, targeted the no-take area's shellfish and sea cucumbers. De Cruz is worried that as the no-take area starts to be effective, more outsiders

will come and try to steal more fish.

De Cruz says that while local people like the park, willingness to volunteer is low. People are too busy scraping out a living from the rocky land around them. To counter this, Conservation International wants to set up a fuel bank in Com for compensating fishermen who agree to spend some of their time going out of their way to patrol the no-take zone.

But while conservationists try to scrape together funds for such village-scale projects, larger sums flow quickly to more conspicuous developments, such as the towering Ministry of Finance building in Dili. Maurice Knight, Chief of Party of the US government's marine environmental aid program in the country says, "Infrastructure investments are attractive as they enable immediate economic development. However, Timor-Leste has yet to develop a national ecotourism strategy as a key component of its development plan as a counter balance. This threatens to make room for a focus on infrastructure investments that may not lead to long-term sustainable development. In fact, without careful planning these investments can lead to exactly the opposite result." **AA**



PRACTICALITIES When to go

The dry season (May to November) brings temperatures over 30°C most days on the coast though it's a little cooler inland in the mountains. The wet season (December to April) sees storms bringing heavy rain at times which also causes flooding and landslides.

How to get there

At present there are only three international gateways to Dili: Singapore, Darwin in Australia and Denpasar in Bali.

Contacts

Dive Timor Lorosae, www.divetimor.com
Haburas Foundation, <http://haburas.org/>
(presently only in Tetum language)
Conservation International Timor-Leste,
www.conservation.org/where/asia-pacific/timor-leste/pages/timor-leste.aspx
Coral Triangle Initiative,
www.coraltriangleinitiative.org