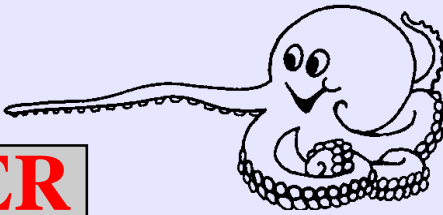


THE REEF SEEKER



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October - 2009

MLPA PROCESS DRAWING TO A CLOSE

Phase 3 of the MLPA process, which covers the SoCal area, is now drawing to a close. Late last month, the Regional Stakeholder Group (RSG) narrowed everything down to three proposals. Those three will now be discussed a bit further and one will be selected to be forwarded to the DF&G for approval.

Our area has been the toughest for a number of reasons. First is that it's very big. Waaaay too big according to some of us. Secondly, there are a variety of habitats to be considered, more so than in other regions, and that's proved problematic. Third, there are an awful lot of existing MPAs (sometimes called "Heritage" areas) that already exist. Fourth, a lot of people have their own favorite spots that they either want to protect or have left alone. And five, with San Nicolas & San Clemente Islands, along with Camp Pendleton and Naval Base San Diego, the military throws a larger monkey wrench into the process than it has in the previous two areas.

To say it's been difficult would be an understatement. But give credit to the 60+ members of the RSG for coming up with three proposals

that have some similarities as well as some striking differences. And if you'd like to get your two cents in on them, there's still time.

Public comment will be taken at the Blue Ribbon Task Force meeting on October 21 in Long Beach. You can speak at the meeting (but individual comments will be very limited in time - most likely 1-3 minutes per speaker given the volume of people who ask to talk) or you can submit comments in writing to the BRTF by October 11. Written comments can be sent to: MLPAComments@resources.ca.gov.

The process in SoCal is winding down so if you've got something to say, this may be your last chance to have your voice heard. For more info on the maps and other MLPA news, on the worldwide web go to <http://www.dfg.ca.gov/mlpa>.

LOBSTER SEASON OPENS

They don't call it "Bug Fever" for nothing . . .

Just a reminder (in case you've been under a rock) that the 2009-2010 lobster season officially opens this Saturday at 12:01AM. Many boats are going out Friday night, usually to Catalina, so they can be in position for when the

clock strikes Midnight and the hunting can begin.

Although we were lucky last year, this is also a time (generally the first week or two of the season) when we can expect a Chamber case involving an embolism, a bends hit, or even a fatality. And it's almost always circumstances that could have been prevented.

So we come with our annual admonition: No lobster is worth your life. Monitor your air supply closely. Don't try to squeeze a few more minutes out of an almost-depleted tank in hopes of snaring a(nother) lobster. Watch your depth and time. And frequently check your computer. And in general terms, just be ready to deal with things that might go wrong.

Lobster season is meant to be a joyous time (except for the lobsters that get caught). Dive safely so you live to dive another day.



FLOWER GARDENS - SEPTEMBER 2010

We are very excited to tell you that we've made arrangements to dive the Flower Gardens National Marine Sanctuary next year, September 12-18. This is a place that we've always wanted to go visit and now it will become a reality.

The Flower Gardens are the northernmost coral reefs in North America and they actually lie in the Gulf of Mexico, about 70-115 miles offshore from the Texas coastline. (Hence, they're sometimes also called the Texas Flower Gardens.) We'll be flying into Houston and leaving out of Freeport, which is just south of Galveston.

Although there are numerous geologic banks in the general area, we'll be diving the three most prominent ones: Stetson Bank, East Flower Gardens Bank, and West Flower Gardens Bank. (As far as I can tell, these are also the only ones with moorings.) The banks cover huge areas and the diving is definitely advanced, mainly due to the depths involved as the reefs generally top out at 60 feet.

But they can offer spectacular diving and there was a study just completed by NOAA that states the coral reef ecosystems at the Flower Gardens are the healthiest reefs in the tropical Gulf and Caribbean. They found that 50% of the area surveyed had live coral coverage which is rare. They also note that the Sanctuary is dominated by top-level predators and that changes the dynamic of everything (in a good way).

If you'd like to find out a bit more about the Flower Gardens,

NOAA's got a great website: <http://flowergarden.noaa.gov>. One of the first things you'll note (and it certainly caught my eye) was the story about how many Whale Sharks they've seen this year, including spotting 22-30 of the gentle giants . . . at one time!!! Pretty impressive. (No guarantees, of course.) But given the location in the Gulf, and the currents that frequent the area, it's certainly something not out of the question. So bring your "Whale Shark Karma" with you.

And if we REALLY get lucky, we may get a coral spawn. According to the NOAA website, the main spawn is 7-10 days after the August full moon. but when the full moon is in early August, there is sometimes a second spawn in September, and it looks like that might be during the time we're there. So you never know.

We'll get in 5 days of diving which is a nice change because most of the trips are 2-day or 3-day affairs. We should be able to do 4-5 dives each day (watching your bottom time of course) and will cover a range of sites and maybe even an oil rig on the way back in.

I'm still working on pricing for this trip. We're going to be on the

MV Fling and they've been running Flower Gardens trips for years and years. They use a converted oil rig crew boat (similar size to the *Spectre*) so it's nothing fancy but it gets the job done. Although the boat will handle as many as 30 divers, I don't want to take anywhere near that many. My plan is to go with no more than 20 and maybe even only 15.

By keeping this as a limited load, since I still have to pay for the entire boat, it raises the per person cost a bit, but I think the better diving experience with fewer divers overall will be well worth it. Even so, we hope is to keep this somewhere around \$2000 (plus airfare) which will get you boat & diving, crew tip, and hotel night on the back end. Nitrox will be available on the trip (and I'd strongly recommend you consider using it for the added bottom time) for an extra \$120.

I think this is going to be a really cool trip and it will certainly be an adventure as it's someplace new for Reef Seekers. I'm already getting some calls on this and it doesn't cost anything to put yourself on the "interested" list. Just give me a buzz or drop me an e-mail. And, if you're ready to commit, \$500 will guarantee your spot.

2010 DIVING VACATIONS

**February 7-13 • Florida
(Manatees & Caverns)**

March 12-21 • Socorro

May 21-29 • Bonaire

DIVING SOCORRO IN MARCH

We're getting good response for our "Return to Socorro" March 12-21 on the *Nautilus Explorer* and we've already sold about half the spots we've been allotted. This is one of the few places left in the world where you can reliably expect/hope/pray to see LOTS of big pelagic animals . . . and you may even get a shot at a Humpback Whale this time of the year.

We had a great trip back in 2008, despite the fact that the water conditions weren't as good as we'd hoped, so we've moved our sked up a few weeks this time in hopes of getting an even better trip in. The boat is wonderful, the crew is terrific, and a good time should be had by all.

We'll need to fly down to Cabo on Friday, March 12, and overnight, since the boat leaves at 9AM on Saturday. We'll sail all day and night Saturday, and will arrive at Socorro mid-morning on Sunday, just in time for church (as long as you're worshipping Hammerheads and Mantas). We'll then spend the next 6 days diving.

"Socorro" is more correctly known as the Revillagigedo Islands and is really four islands: San Benedicto, the main island of Socorro, Roca Partida, and Clarion. But Clarion is too far away to include so we'll dive the first three. If we follow the same sked as we did last year, it'll be two days at each. But we can alter the itinerary based on weather and water conditions.

When we were there in 2008, we saw every pelagic on our list: Hammerheads, Mantas, Dolphins, and four other species of Sharks (in-

UPCOMING BOAT DIVES

DAY	DATE	BOAT	INTENDED DESTINATION
Sunday	Oct. 18	Great Escape	Farnsworth/Catalina back
	Early Purchase (thru 10/11)		\$140 / \$126.00 (Reef Saver/club)
Saturday	Oct. 31	Great Escape	Santa Barbara Island
	Early Purchase (thru 10/24)		\$150 / \$135.00 (Reef Saver/club)
Saturday	Nov. 14	Sea Bass	Oil Rigs (limited load)
	Early Purchase (thru 11/7)		\$135 / \$121.50 (Reef Saver/club)
Sunday	Dec. 6	Great Escape	San Clemente (Pyramid)
	Early Purchase (thru 11/29)		\$155 / \$139.50 (Reef Saver/club)

cluding a night dive with Silkies). And maybe this year we'll get to add "Whale Shark" and "Humpback Whale" to our count. But as I said in my 2008 trip report: You know you're being spoiled when your biggest complaint about a dive day is, "I couldn't find the whale."

Cost of this trip is \$3395 plus airfare (which is running around \$500 if you have to pay for it or free if you have miles to get into Cabo). This will cover your boat costs (standard room with a roomie), port tax, crew tip, airport transfers, and all the fun you can handle.

I'm looking forward to going back and hope to entice a few more of you to join the group we've already got. It's going to be another memorable Reef Seekers trip and you don't want to miss out.

WATCH OUT FOR MORE AIRLINE FEES

The days of free bags on international flights may be limited as some of the carriers have announced plans to start charging for those bags the same way they do on domestic flights. This is especially troubling for divers because

we're sort of stuck with taking a lot of luggage.

Also be aware that a few carriers are re-doing the allowed size of their carry-ons (making them smaller of course) so the bag that was legal last year may not be legal this year. Make sure you check baggage allowances and regulations for whatever airline you're flying before you go.

There's even a rumor (via leaked e-mail) that British Airways is thinking of charging you to reserve a seat ahead of check-in!!! Can pay toilets on the planes be far behind? (And they wonder why we're so grumpy when we fly nowadays . . .)

The other thing to be aware of when you travel is the expiration date on your passport. Many countries require that it be valid for 6 months beyond the date you arrive. If it's less than that, they may send you back home (or won't let you on the plane in the first place.)

But here's an easy way to get around this and play it safe: American passports are good for 10 years. Renew yours every 9 years (when you still have a full year to go) and the six-month rule won't be a problem for you

PHOTO TIP

Wanna make sure all your o-rings are sealed and there's no dust on your lens or port? I've started carrying a small bright flashlight to use to check everything out. When you hold it at a slight angle to a lens or port, you can really see smudges or dust better than you do in regular light. And it's really handy for double-checking that o-rings are sealed before you take the plunge. I've got a small Leatherman penlight (Monarch 400) that I've been using as a dedicated camera inspection light but any small, bright flashlight will do.



HATS OFF TO PALAU

We like Palau anyhow but we especially like Palau now that they've declared their entire Exclusive Economic Zone - all waters within 200 miles of the Palauan coastline - to be a Shark Sanctuary. That means no taking of sharks, period. Palau President Johnson Toribiong made the announcement at the end of last month during the opening sessions of the United Nations in New York.

It's a huge step for Palau and one that comes with logistical problems too in that Palau only has one patrol boat to look out for illegal

shark fishing. But it's a start. And there's hope that Palau's actions will spur other nations to take similar steps.

Aside from the brutality of shark finning, there's a huge problem worldwide in that we're simply removing too many sharks, top predators, from the oceans. Estimates range anywhere from 30 million to 100 million sharks killed per year. But even if you go with the smaller number, there's concern. And if you dive any of the great shark areas of the world, you know - with very few exceptions - there aren't as many sightings as there used to be, even 10-15 years ago.

So hat's off to Palau and here's hoping it's the first of a number of nations to adopt such practices.

PICTURE PAGE - Lobsters of the World

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2009)



Lobster in California



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Lobster in Baja



Lobster in Cocos



Lobster in Socorro



Lobster in Palau