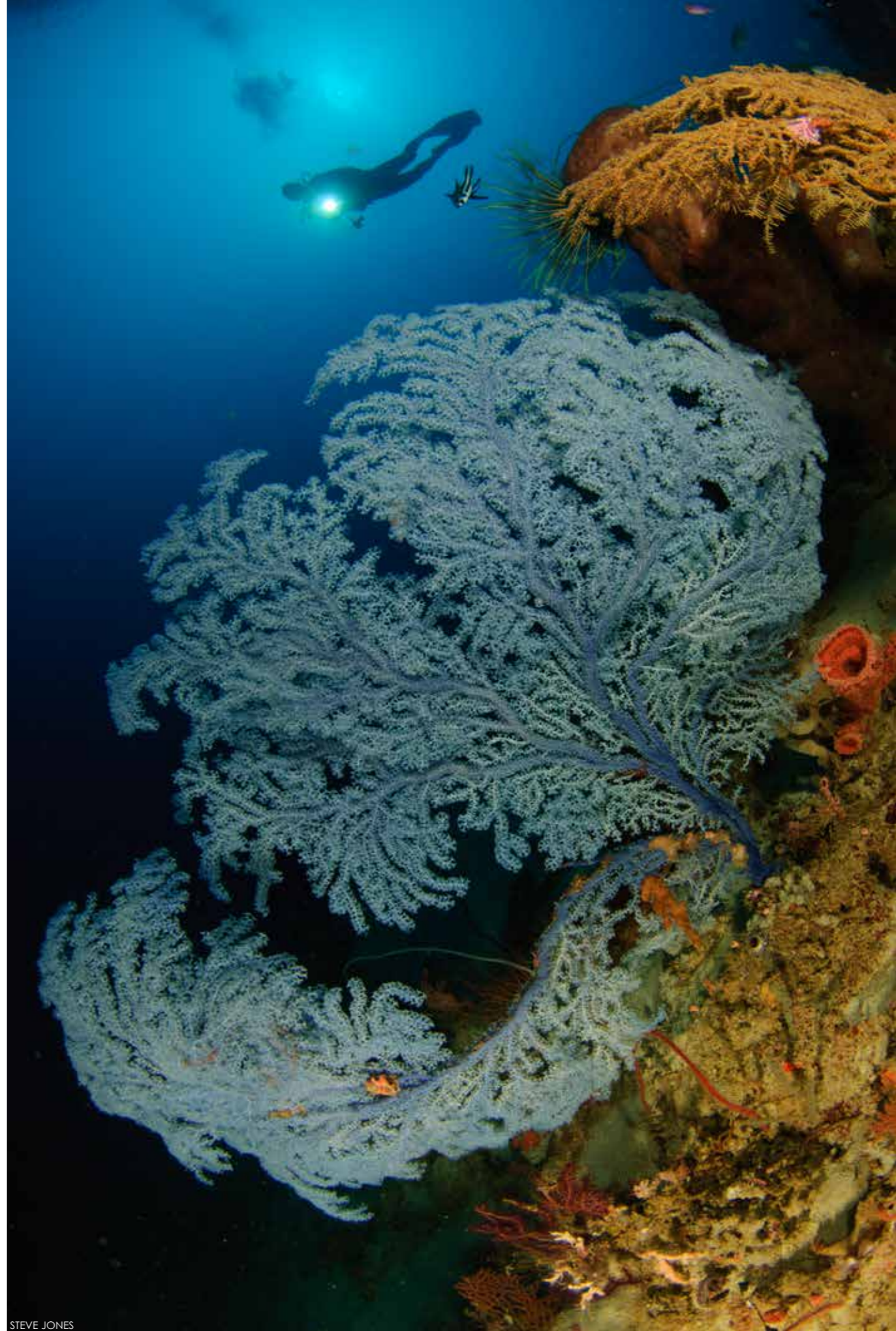




Diver with very rare blue sea fan, *Acanthogorgia* sp., found below 45 metres depth, Gorontalo, Sulawesi, Indonesia



STEVE JONES

Scuba Confidential

What if Diving was New?

Text by Simon Pridmore
Photos by Steve Jones
Millionfish.com

Imagine scuba diving is a brand new sport. You hear about it for the first time when one of your friends tells you about a scuba experience she had recently on holiday and you think this sounds incredibly exciting.

After thinking about it for a long time, you decide you want to learn. You take lessons to improve your swimming and then you look online for a dive instructor. There are no dive centres in your town. You have never actually seen a dive centre. You will have to travel to a nearby island to learn.

You are the first person you know who has signed up for a scuba diving course. For the people of your parents' generation, even if they were aware that scuba diving existed, they would

never have considered it even remotely possible that they could learn to dive. Diving was something that navy personnel did. It was a professional activity, not a sport.

Now they know that you are going to become a diver, your friends are envious and your family are worried about you. You feel like you are embarking on an adventure that will change your life.

The first scuba divers

In the 1950s and 1960s this must have been how it was for the first sport divers in Europe and the United States where scuba diving as a leisure activity began. The baby boomers born in the States and Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War were the first people ever to go under water for fun. Before, everyone who had dived was doing a job and had

no time or inclination to take any notice of what was happening around him. Nor, before Cousteau and Gagnan

came up with the idea of the aqua-lung, did anyone have the opportunity to move around very far, tethered as they were to the surface.

Several free magazines have been published, featuring movie stars and pop idols as diving role models. The gurus and industry leaders here are in their 20's or 30's.

But in Indonesia, where we are fortunate to live, this is what is happening right now! People have been diving in Indonesia for decades but only recently have Indonesians themselves been diving here, other than as professional dive-masters and guides. For the first time, a generation of Indonesians has the economic security and free time to dive for fun.

Scuba is COOL!

The wonders of Indonesia's underwater world are now constantly featured in newspapers, magazines and television documentaries. Several free magazines have been published, featuring movie stars and pop idols as diving role models. The gurus and industry leaders here are in their 20's or 30's. Scuba is COOL!

My dive buddy and I visited a hotel on the Sunda coast a few months ago and were sitting by the pool in the

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opinion

evening while a film unit was shooting scenes for one of Indonesia's most popular television soap operas.

One of the crew came over and asked what we were doing there and when we explained we were scuba divers, filming came to an abrupt halt and all the cast members, actors and actresses famous throughout the country, immediately surrounded us, asking questions about diving and saying how they were all planning to do courses. We felt like we were the stars!

World class diving — on your doorstep

How wonderful must it be to start diving and then discover that some of the best diving in the world is there right

on your doorstep? The vast majority of Indonesia's 170,000 plus islands lie in the coral triangle where two massive oceans, the Pacific and the Indian, join.

Places that people spend tens of thousands of dollars to visit for just a few days a year are easily accessible to you pretty much any time you want to go there. Do you fancy a long weekend in Komodo? You could leave work in Jakarta on Friday evening and be diving off Cannibal Rock the next morning. How about Christmas in Raja Ampat? Why wait until Christmas? There are overnight flights to Sorong from Jakarta every night of the week.

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Positive benefits

On a serious note the environmental and conservation consequences of so many Indonesians learning to dive can only be positive. The country has an appalling conservation record on land and sea, with plenty of well-meaning laws protecting the environment but very little implementation or enforcement. A new generation of divers could well be a powerful force in turning the situation around.

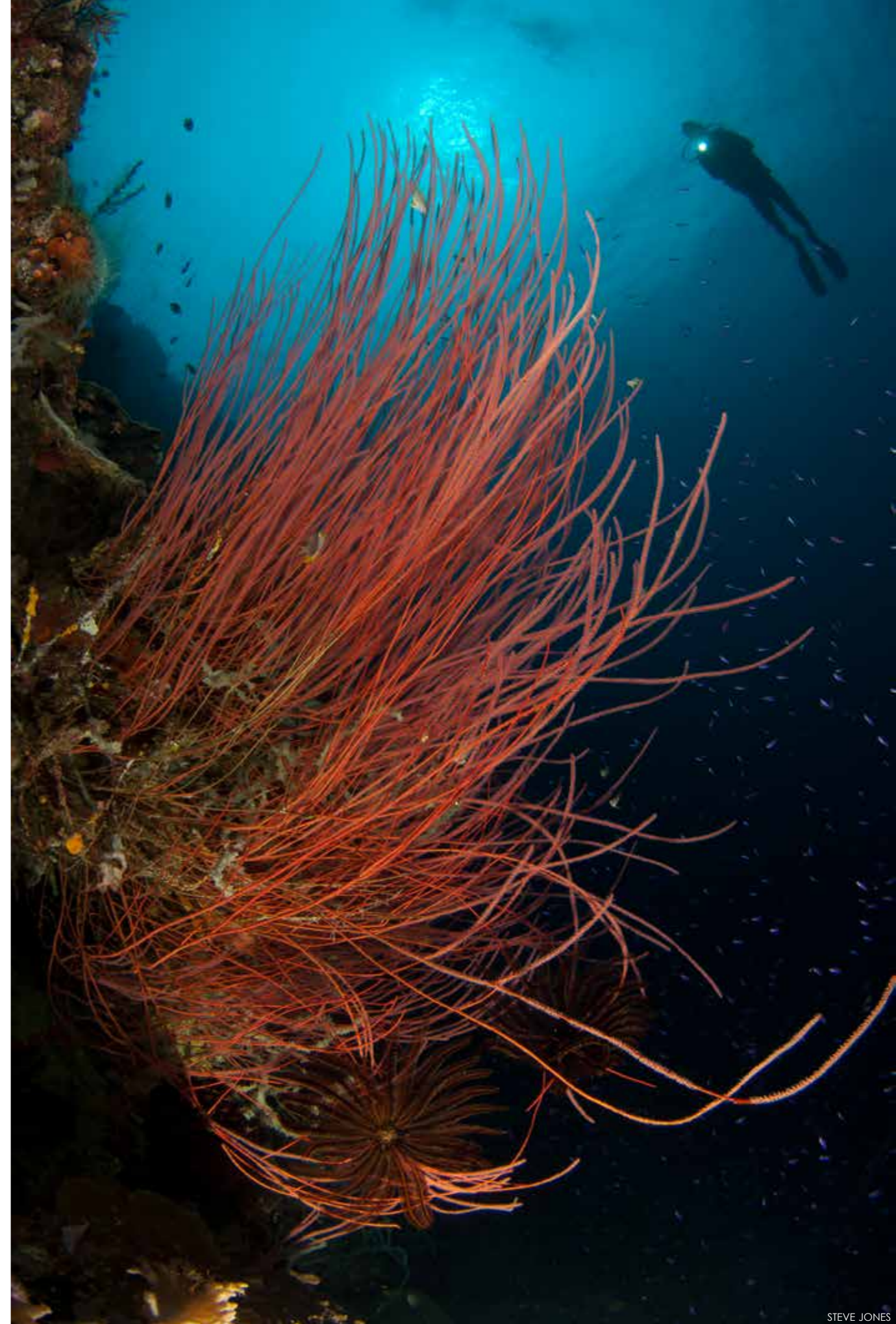
Living in Indonesia and seeing scuba diving through the eyes of newcomers to the sport is refreshing. Coming from a part of the world where scuba diving is well established and it is taken for granted that almost anyone can dive if they want to, it is wonderful to witness a whole society that is discovering the joys of dipping their heads below the surface of the sea for the first time.

Comedian Dave Barry once wrote, "When you finally see what goes on underwater, you realize that you've been missing the whole point of the ocean. Staying on the surface all the time is like going to the circus and staring at the outside of the tent."

Welcome to the circus, Indonesia! ■

Simon Pridmore has been part of the scuba diving scene in Asia, Europe and the United States (well, Guam) for the past 20 years or so. His latest book, also called Scuba Confidential, is available in paperback and e-Book on Amazon.

Diver and grand sea whip (right) and porcelain crab on anemone (below) in Gorontalo, Indonesia



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