



On Inner Strength

Bamboo Nights

North Sulawesi, Indonesia (April 2003)

One of the nicest things about bamboo is that it floats. For this, I was extremely grateful.

If bamboo sank, I thought, there's no way we'd be sitting here. What would we be doing instead? How would we stretch our legs? Where would we squat to go to the bathroom?! Odd as it might seem, this was the main thing on my mind. Bamboo.

I suppose that all things considered, my erstwhile fixation on this plant made reasonable sense given my circumstances.

I was at sea again - hungry, parched, exhausted and somewhat concerned that I had virtually no idea where I was.

Given the number of times I've placed myself in similar outlandish circumstances, you would think I'd have gotten used to this sort of thing by now, but a slight sense of anxiety never fails to set in once the sun begins to set, and the immediate distraction of trying

to dodge UV radiation strong enough to fry eggs subsides.

So here I was, with five other guys, on a tiny bamboo platform in the middle of the sea, tethered tenuously by a lone rope to the ocean floor several hundred meters below.

NOT AS CRAZY AS IT SEEMS

It would be natural to wonder how I ended up here and what I hoped to accomplish.

First, the platform (pictured above) isn't really as random a structure as it might first seem. In fact, there many of them in the waters around North Sulawesi.

Locally, people call them Fish Huts, which seems a perfectly adequate description to me. More "sophisticated" people elsewhere refer to them as Fish Aggregating Devices ("FADs").

Whatever they're called, these bamboo platforms serve

a single purpose: To attract as many fish as possible.

In deep, open water like this, the sheltered area under the Fish Hut provides refuge for little fish, pelagic larvae and other small creatures.

And of course, anytime there's a congregation of small organisms, bigger fish eventually visit, thus attracting even more and bigger fish...eventually leading to the build-up of a substantial community of resident fish.

Which, in a round about way, was my reason for being here.

I was hoping to find and photograph pelagic fish communities.

SLEEPING WITH BAMBOO

Water sloshed against the hollow bamboo logs, producing ghostly echoes, like contemplative rhythms resonating from a Zen monastery.

I lay my head in the narrow, distorted "V" shaped trench formed by two of the logs, and contorted the rest of my body ▶▶



Anceng - fisherman, guide and friend

▶ as best I could to conform to the hard curves of the bamboo. Centimeters below, the ocean rippled gently in the night breeze. Water sometimes sprayed onto my face, leaving a crusty film of half-dried brine to remind me of where I was.

I lay there half asleep, contemplating, of all things, bamboo.

I recalled that there are literally thousands of species of bamboo. It isn't considered commercial timber, like oak or teak, for instance, but that doesn't mean it's not valuable.

Bamboo is flexible and pliable, which makes it easy to use, and adaptable to many circumstances. Yet it's strong, sturdy and reliable at the same time.

It doesn't get water-logged, so you can make all sorts of useful things out of it (like the platform I was on), and it's not terribly susceptible to pests.

Bamboo wood is inexpensive, lasts a long time, and bears its given burden quietly, almost philosophically, like a tireless, uncomplaining friend.

The most striking thing to me about this under-appreciated plant, however, was how entirely uncomfortable it is to (try to) sleep on it in the middle of the ocean.

YOU SHOULD'VE COME LAST WEEK

The difficulty with getting images of pelagic fish is that you have to go where they are - the middle of the ocean.

On the whole, it would be much easier and preferable in my view if tuna, marlin, large sharks and the like visited shallow waters more often to pose for pictures, but alas, this



Anceng's boat: Intended for two, a tight fit for the five of us!

doesn't seem to be at the top of their list of priorities.

Which is why I was tagging along like a dorky kid on a Sunday outing with my friend Anceng in his fishing boat.

We had set out the day before from Bitung, the main port area in North Sulawesi, on Anceng's five-meter-long fishing boat.

Normally, the boat - really more a canoe stabilised with bamboo outriggers - carries two people and supplies.

On this trip, we had a total of five passengers, which made for a rather "cozy" situation. The extra guys were there to babysit me and make sure I didn't do something embarrassing, like fall overboard.

So packed like proverbial sardines in a can, we headed out to search for big fish. As it turns out, we came across a lot of big stuff, which would've been absolutely terrific, if not for one minor issue: temporal displacement.

I kid you not. Every place we stopped, there were sightings of whale sharks, schools of yellowfin tuna, sailfish, pilot

whales...you name it.

The one minor problem, of course, was that all the sightings were during the past week or two. Aiyah.

One helpful fishermen, trying desperately to assist, told me that a whaleshark had "hung out" near his Fish Hut for at least two weeks.

He mistook the pained expression on my face for heat exhaustion, and kindly suggested I go for a quick swim to cool off.

WHAT A LIFE

And swim I did, not so much to cool off, but more to "cool off", in the sense of quenching my growing frustration.

As soon as I got in, though, I realised that missing the whaleshark didn't really matter.

It wasn't so much a sudden attitude adjustment on my part, but simply the fact that the visibility below the surface was horrible, just bloody awful. Couldn't see a whaleshark if it tapped me on the shoulder and stuck out its tongue.

So I finned back to the Fish ▶▶

碧深海 Sea Stories: Travel notes and thoughts

▶ Hut, flopped on like a large, uncoordinated fish, and decided to make the best of it.

While drying off on the “sundeck”, I struck up a conversation with the guy on the Fish Hut (via my friends’ translation of course).

“How long have you been out here?”

“Two months.”

“Wow, that’s a long time. When are you going back?”

“In about four months”.

I let that sink in for a moment.

I asked again, and he confirmed again, that typically, he and other fishermen stay for periods of six months on the Fish Huts.

Egads! Six months? Alone. On a 3 x 8 meter bamboo platform in the middle of the ocean. A small hut, a wok, rice, water, cigarettes, local whiskey, kerosene and a short wave radio. I looked around; that’s all he had.

Suddenly, it didn’t seem so important that I wouldn’t be getting any images of pelagic fish.

“So do you get any visitors, like family or friends?”

“No.”, he replied very matter of factly. No wonder he looked delighted to see us.

“What happens when the seas are rough, like during storms and the typhoon season?”

“I stay inside the hut.”

“Don’t you get seasick?”

A wry smile showed me his cracked, yellowing teeth, or at least those that were left.

I sat silently, watching the sun descend to the horizon, trying to take in the magnitude of what he was saying.

Then he said, “Sometimes, the rope breaks.”, in a rather understated manner.

‘What rope?’, I thought. “You mean the rope that holds the Fish Hut here?...!!!”

Another toothy grin, accompanied by a sparkle in his bloodshot eyes.

“When it happens, I stay inside and wait for the storm to pass. There are lots of boats, so I usually get picked up.”



The look of a seasoned fisherman

The part that hung in my mind was the word “usually”.

“What if you don’t?”

A very wide smile, revealing the premature wrinkles and cracks in his complexion. “Sometimes I end up in the Philippines.”

We were getting to know each other well enough by now that he knew I wanted to hear more.

“When that happens, I have to contact my employer and hope he sends money so I can come back.”

So let me get this straight.

He stays on the Fish Hut for six months at a time. He has nearly no visitors. He lives on rice, water and small fish you catch. “Why?”, I thought.

As if on cue, he got up and started to fill and light four kerosene lamps.

I learned from my friends that all the guys on the Fish Huts have to keep bright kerosene lamps lit through the night. The light attracts small fish and other marine organisms to the Fish Hut, which is the first step to aggregating large communities of fish.

When enough fish congregate, the fishermen call into home base on the radio. The Fish Hut owners then dispatch a boat, which usually gets there during the night. Upon arrival, the boat surrounds the Fish Hut with a large net to trap the fish.

At dawn, they haul in the net, pass more rice and kerosene to the guy on the Fish Hut, and hurry back to sell the fish for export.

For his trouble, the guy on the Fish Hut gets Rp 300,000 per month (less than US\$ 40) plus a small percentage of the sales proceeds.

What a life.

FLYING FOR FISH?

I woke up, or rather, fell rudely into consciousness, at first light. The first thing I had to do was crack every joint in my body, and work out all the kinks in my neck from trying to be at one with the bamboo.

The night had been calm, and other than being sore, knotted up, hungry, thirsty, grimy, salty and generally smelling of year-old fish guts, everything ▶▶

碧深海 Sea Stories: Travel notes and thoughts

▶ was just fine.

The guys had stayed up much of the night fishing, and our host deep fried the catch of small fish for breakfast, probably in the same oil he'd been using for the past two months.

Cold white rice, ground red chili, and salty fish fried a crispy dark brown in stale oil at 06:00 hours. Nothing ever tasted quite so good!

We chatted a bit more, then set off once again in search of large fish.

Anceng had been eager to show me his fishing prowess, and today was going to be the day. We hadn't been out long when we came across a pod of very active spinner dolphins, which are often accompanied by schools of big fish, particularly tuna.

"Wooohoooo!", Anceng and his mate cried out.

My friends told me to hang on and watch closely.

One of the many intriguing things I came across tucked away in the nooks and

crannies of the boat were a few kites...yes, the kind that you fly.

They were homemade, rather small, with spines made of (you guessed it) bamboo.

I thought it slightly strange to have these kites in the boat, but I didn't think it would harm anything if the guys wanted to have a bit of fun while we were out for the serious business of photographing fish.

But when Anceng reached for one of the kites, I truly thought the equatorial heat had gone to his head.

What followed was something I was wholly unprepared for.

As we kept pace with the dolphins, Anceng's mate launched a kite high into the air.

"How odd.", I thought.

Anceng then took control of the kite, and as his mate steered, maneuvered the kite in front of the dolphins, which were perhaps half a kilometer away.

Get this...he then used the kite to skip a lure (which was tied to the kite) over the water in front of the dolphins!

One of the guys leaned over and told me to keep my eye on the bouncing bait.

Easier said than done. First, the kite was really high up, literally a dot in the sky, and the lure was attached by a long fishing line, which was impossible to see.

On the first pass, nothing happened. So we turned the boat around, and Anceng repositioned the kite for another try.

Several attempts later, it happened. A forty-kilogram yellowfin tuna leapt two meters out of the water and struck.



Landing a yellowfin tuna.

Two meters. No joke.

Forgetting that I was on a small boat, I jumped up to get a better look and nearly fell out (lucky the extra guys were around to grab me).

The powerful tuna hit the water with an enormous splash and plunged into the abyss. The kite plummeted and struck the surface of the water with a nice, crisp "smack!"

The boat slowed. Anceng started to pull the tuna in.

Anyone who's ever tried to pull even a small fish in with their bare hands will know how difficult it is. This sucker was well over forty kilograms, but it didn't seem to bother Anceng at all. Within a few minutes, the fish was in the boat.

BAMBOO INSPIRED REVELATIONS

As it turns out, we were all so busy scurrying around the boat, rearranging items to make room for the tuna, that we lost sight of the dolphins and hence the school of fish.

The ocean is so amazingly ▶▶



Launching a kite to catch fish?!

碧深海 Sea Stories: Travel notes and thoughts

▶ big, it's deceptively easy to lose hundreds of dolphins and fish.

We cruised in silence for several more hours...Anceng fuming at losing the chance to catch more tuna; my friends desperately scanning the horizon for tell-tale splashes; and I, pondering my recent experiences.

As the sun started its daily descent, we decided to head back home rather than spend another night out on the bamboo.

It's funny...I should've been cranky and disappointed. The visibility had been poor. I didn't get the images of pelagic fish I came for.

But when we reached the harbour and regrouped for our first real meal in days, I couldn't have been more content.

You see, I had learned something valuable.

As I left my friends after our final dinner together, I recalled once again the haunting sound of water striking the hollow bamboo of the Fish Hut platforms, the sound that permeated my dreams each night.

What was only noise before became a coded message from the sea, whispered to me during my nights on the Fish Huts.

Like so many thousands

of species of bamboo, the numerous fishermen of North Sulawesi - the inshore fishermen, the robust, wandering fishermen like Anceng, the lone sentinels who spend months, sometimes years, in virtual solitary confinement on the Fish Huts, and the multitude of other fishermen I didn't have a chance to meet - all possess and share a common inner strength.

Like bamboo, they're not particularly glamorous, rich or sophisticated.

They don't get the funding, attention or respect of, say, the large fishing fleets from more advanced nations. They lead a hard life, filled with daily trials and tribulations most of us can't begin to fathom.

But also like bamboo, they are a strong, genuine lot who make the best of their circumstances. They endure whatever comes their way without complaint. They bear their burdens in silence. Storms, loneliness, back-breaking labour, getting swept to foreign lands...it's all in a day's work.

They are — in a sense — bamboo personified.

From the Fish Hut platforms to outriggers for their wooden boats and the spines of their kites, the fishermen's lives



Anceng in his element.

depend upon bamboo.

At the same time, their gentle nature and enduring demeanor reflect the unique character and resilience of this precious, if not underrated, plant.

In North Sulawesi, the fishermen are the framework of society.

And by virtue of the many fish they catch and export, many more of us well beyond the immediate area depend upon these strong, silent men in some way. They, like bamboo, are truly unsung heroes.

This was the message from the sea during my sleepless, bamboo nights. ■



The next generation of fishermen.

AFTERWARD

Despite the fact that I failed miserably in my main objective of seeing and photographing big pelagic animals, this adventure turned out to be one of the most moving and memorable experiences of my life.

The unique perspective I gained has stuck with me, and I make it a point to learn from local cultures wherever I go. It's amazing just how much there is to learn.

I never, ever want to sleep on a bamboo raft again though.