

# In palm oil's uncertain grip

The growth of the industry in Papua New Guinea helped lead to the discovery of Kimbe Bay's rich reefs, but it is also one of the threats to those same reefs

Story by **Ken Kassem** Photography by **Eric Madeja**



IN THE LATE 1960S, A YOUNG AUSTRALIAN called Max Benjamin bought an old coconut plantation in West New Britain, an island province of Papua New Guinea (PNG). He was part of a government initiative anticipating a surge in demand for the oil it produces, and in his time off, learned to scuba dive and explored the reefs of the neighbouring bay.

The reefs seemed incredibly prolific but it was not until Benjamin took a trip to the Red Sea in the 1980s that he realised just how special they were. He bought more gear and a compressor and

soon word got around. As more and more visitors dropped by to see what he had on his doorstep, he decided to formally open what is today called the Walindi Plantation Resort.

Palm oil is the agricultural commodity that everybody loves to hate. The versatile oil is used in countless consumer goods and helps provide food security for poor people around the world. But it also leads to the widespread replacement – particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia in recent decades – of biodiverse tropical rainforest with areas of monoculture that are often described as

**HANDY EXTRA INCOME**  
New Britain Palm Oil collects fruit from oil palms like these, planted by small holders, and automatically deposits the earnings into the farmer's bank.

ecological deserts.

Today, much of the oil palm that cloaks the land around Walindi is owned or managed by New Britain Palm Oil, the largest oil palm company in PNG. The money derived from the trees helps make West New Britain one of the country's richest provinces, where the reliance on

marine resources is low. There is no commercial fishing and most of the fishing pressure is on reefs near towns and scattered settlements. It helps too that PNG as a whole has only 6.4 million people, meaning its reefs face less pressure from overfishing and destructive fishing methods compared to, say, the Philippines with approximately 100 million.

The reefs in the middle of Kimbe Bay, farther from shore are still considered to be in very good condition, rich in biodiversity and important for marine mammals and large pelagic fish. Dr Charlie Veron, one of the world's foremost coral experts, has said he would be hard pressed to think of better reefs and that Kimbe's reefs remind him of what he saw 40 years ago when he first started diving.

But, closer to shore, soil and nutrients washing off the steep hills threaten these reefs, especially during the rainy season that brings prodigious amounts of rain.

Corals are tiny animals that survive through a special relationship with microscopic algae that live in the coral's tissues. There isn't enough plankton in warm, clear, tropical water to feed the corals so they are subsidised by the energy produced by the photosynthesizing algae. In return, the algae get a safe place to live.

The key to this interdependency is that the water must be clear enough for sunlight to reach the coral. Sediment carried off the land by torrential tropical storms can reduce the water clarity, smother the coral and turn a rich reef ecosystem into a wasteland. A 2012 report on the prolific area of ocean that includes Kimbe – 'Reefs at Risk in the Coral Triangle' – estimated that 45% of its reefs are threatened by land-based sedimentation and pollution.

The sedimentation of Kimbe's reefs comes from a mix of sources. The almost 37,000 hectares of palm oil plantation around Kimbe Bay contribute to this, from unsealed plantation roads, and particularly every 20-30 years, when areas of older palms are replaced. Aside from palm oil, clear cut logging operations add to the load and then there is the effect of more people moving to the area to build houses and plant gardens which adds further roads.

New Britain Palm Oil says it has gone to great lengths to apply industry best practices, with every one of its plantations in New Guinea certified as sustainable by the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO).

RSPO has a long list of principles and criteria for determining sustainability. By meeting those criteria and being assessed by an independent

auditor, a plantation can assure buyers that best practices are being followed. One of those criteria is the control of erosion. New Britain Palm Oil's Director of Sustainability, Dr Simon Lord, says "After all, we're farmers. In the tropical soil, the top 15 centimetres keeps all the nutrients. So you don't want to lose soil. That's just silly. That's not good agricultural practice."

Unfortunately, the RSPO criteria do not include any indicators that measure the health of nearby marine ecosystems. The indicators only look at the sediment loads carried by rivers running through the plantation area. These capture the effect of run-off from the dirt roads within the plantation but say nothing about impacts from the percentage of the area's population growth that is down to palm oil.

With the vast majority of the world's palm oil planted in the Coral Triangle, these limitations seem like major oversights. But according to the Secretary General of RSPO, Darrel Webber, nobody even mentioned impacts on the oceans as the standard was being developed.

The RSPO criteria for sustainability are determined by a consensus of its membership which comprises palm oil companies, environmentalists, social advocates, governments and community representatives. Attempting to satisfy these varied stakeholders inevitably brings compromises and those compromises leave RSPO open to criticism too. Even WWF, one of the RSPO's founding organisations, criticised them in 2013 for not doing enough to strengthen greenhouse gas emission and pesticide use

## PRACTICALITIES

### When to go

With a tropical climate, temperatures here are fairly constant all year, with most days reaching 25-35°C. There's also plenty of rain, with no months being truly dry and November to April being especially wet.

### How to get there

Air Niugini connect Kimbe to the capital, Port Moresby, and other major cities in PNG.

### Contacts

Mahonia na Dari: [mahonianadari.org](http://mahonianadari.org)

Walindi Plantation Resort:

[www.febrina.com](http://www.febrina.com)

Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil:

[www.rspo.org](http://www.rspo.org)

## Make your voice heard

Share your thoughts on palm oil, or on your own experience of Kimbe, by commenting at [www.facebook.com/actionasiamagazine](http://www.facebook.com/actionasiamagazine) or to [aa@bluincmedia.com](mailto:aa@bluincmedia.com)

## CLEARLY STILL INTACT

Corals in the middle of Kimbe Bay, far from the impacts of land, are relatively healthy and vibrant:







criteria. More fundamentally, a lack of demand for certified palm oil means it often gets mixed with uncertified product, therefore sacrificing the profit margin that should come from certification. This reduces the incentive to invest in improving operations on a larger scale.

It is ironic that the development of oil palm plantations led to the reefs of Kimbe Bay becoming so well known for their beauty and richness. After opening the Walindi resort, Max and wife Cecile helped encourage the American environmental group, The Nature Conservancy, to conduct studies in the area and establish a network of locally managed marine parks. They established, with support from the European Union, the Kimbe Bay Marine Research Centre and the local environmental conservation group Mahonia na Dari (Guardians of the Sea).

But The Nature Conservancy withdrew from Kimbe Bay in the late 2000s to pursue policy action at the national level. The local government department managing fisheries says it has no budget or capacity to support the parks and only a couple of them still function as such.

“My provincial government does not see any priority for fisheries or marine conservation so we can’t do anything,” says West New Britain Fisheries Advisor, Mr Newell Sinaigawi.

Until the reefs of Kimbe Bay become a

priority for the government, the best possible result is that New Britain Palm Oil’s continued commitment to RSPO practices ensures that sedimentation gets no worse. For his part, Benjamin hopes that Mahonia na Dari’s ongoing efforts to educate local children will encourage them to see the naturally occurring land and marine resources on their doorstep as just as important to their economic well-being as the palms that have, in places, replaced them. **AA**

**Diving elsewhere in PNG**

Planning a trip to New Britain? Consider adding these areas of PNG to your itinerary:

- Lissenung Island Resort, [www.lissenungisland.com](http://www.lissenungisland.com)
- Loloata Island Resort, [www.loloata.com](http://www.loloata.com)
- Nusa Island Retreat, [www.nusaislandretreat.com.pg](http://www.nusaislandretreat.com.pg)
- Tufi Resort, [www.tufidive.com](http://www.tufidive.com)

For more general info on diving, try PNG Diving Association, [www.pngdive.com](http://www.pngdive.com)

**EDGE EFFECTS**

Some used to plant oil palm right to the water’s edge. Now, under RSPO criteria, any new planting or replanting must include a buffer zone.



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