

# Background to the book Above and Below

by Wade Doak

For almost half a century I have been an underwater explorer. But as one of the first to visit the blue continent I had a background in the arts, not sciences.

While at Canterbury University in the sixties I studied Shakespeare on the banks of the Avon. But I was clad in a diving suit, scuba tank on my back, fins on my feet. To earn my keep I was bolting together sections of sewer pipe on the streambed. At intervals, while cranes and heavy machines did their work, I was engrossed in the bard...

While probing the realms of a blue world as a pioneer I have always felt as though I were making a reportage to society at large from another planet. Having now written seventeen books about the sea, with a background in languages and a good grasp of the sciences I consider myself to have a role of a translator reclaiming a province too readily given over to science, for my own kind.

My mid-life crisis was a eureka experience on land that shocked me into realizing the above-sea world was equally surprising when viewed with the alien eye of an innerspaceman - a diver. This resulted in my above and below project, subject of this book.

Out near the edge of Northland's continental shelf a giant figure lies on its back, staring at the sky. Twelve miles away a rocky headland extends its jutting finger towards the Poor Knights Islands. The flanks of the promontory are clad in luxuriant rainforest. Below the waves life continues in burgeoning profusion; layer after layer of encrusting marine creatures all the way down to the sandy seabed.

For 35 years this headland coast and the adjacent Poor Knights have been my deepest interest. I have sought to gain an overall understanding of one small portion of the planet. As my mind rose from the sea to explore the forest I found a parallel web of life. The same diversity of shape and colour I loved so much down below was all around me on the headlands.

One day in early spring when it was too stormy to dive, I had set out for a stroll in the rainforest near my home. A biologist diving companion alerted me to some tiny life forms on the forest floor. For the first time I saw the fragile greenhood orchids that I'd been treading on all my life. As I knelt close to them a thought stirred in my mind. A memory from beneath the sea. Those long, pale pink tendrils reminded me of the coral shrimp's feelers. But then another realization struck me: the elongate sepals would serve to attract insects to land on the green platform beneath them and pollinate the orchid. Similar pattern: similar purpose. From that moment wherever I rambled in the rainforest patterns emerged with which I was already familiar after years of exploring the sea.

Waving from a crevice in the richly encrusted sea cliff are twin pairs of long white antennae. Within I find a banded coral shrimp. Closeby is its partner. Coral shrimp couples live in the same shelter for several years. Their boldly marked bodies, striped like a barber's pole in red and white and their showy antennae have a special purpose. Most shrimps and crabs are very secretive during the day because fishes regard them as favourite items of diet. But no fish would ever eat a coral shrimp. These are the surgeons of the reef. Their crevices are cleaning stations. (Barbers too once acted as minor surgeons). Attracted by the prominent feelers and bold markings reef fish congregate at these cleaning stations and await treatment. Their waiting rooms are crevices. With specially adapted pincers, very like a surgeon's forceps, the nimble shrimps remove sea lice and fungal growths from the gills, fin bases and skin of fishes. There is immense trust all around. They even enter the mouths of big predators such as groupers or moray eels, to clean their teeth.

Eventually I found a spider orchid that also reminded me of the coral shrimp: both life forms use red as a signal to attract symbionts. And like the shrimp, barbers traditionally attracted customers with a red and white striped pole. And barbers once provided simple surgery...

I was discovering what philosopher Gregory Bateson has called an ecology of mind: "in so far as we are mental processes to that same extent we must expect the natural world to show similar characteristics of mentality" he wrote\*. Or as I put it, whatever may be intelligent in our own minds, there will be an expression of that intelligence in the organisation of the world around us. I found that by comparing patterns from two very different worlds, ocean and rainforest, I could arrive at a basic blue print, the pattern common to both. This is what Bateson called "the pattern that connects".

With a bagful of cameras and lenses I began to study and compare life patterns in the mangroves around our cottage and in the nearby headland forests, with those I knew so well in the sea, coming to appreciate them as ecosystems just as fascinating and diverse as the coral reef. I used the same camera techniques and lighting as when diving so that I could focus and pry into all the wettest, darkest places. As I pressed the trigger I even found myself holding my breath to avoid the noise of bubbles! I was **land diving**.

Eventually I gained enough parallel insights and pictures to begin assembling a portrait of two worlds: "Air world, water world thorough hurled" wrote my favourite poet Gerard Manley Hopkins\*\* whose concept of inscaping underlies my aesthetic appreciation of nature.. I offer these comparisons as sign posts, knowing other people will have similar insights that extend and develop my own.

\* "**Mind and Nature - a Necessary Unity**"

\*\* **Epithalamion**

In the mid-seventies, following an inaugural **Sir Douglas Robb Memorial Lecture** to a large audience (circa 500) at the Auckland Museum, I began to tour New Zealand with a twin slide **Above / Below** presentation, sponsored by the Conservation Department .

Besides school and university students and public exhibitions, my novel presentation of patterns of life, above and below water, was very well received by several photographic societies. I found the general public most responsive to my fusion of images from ocean and rainforest. I believe such paired images have the power to jolt the mind into biassociative thought patterns, - often a source of new creativity and originality.

Encouraged by this initial success I have continued to develop my visual resources while questing for a better approach, one which is more flexible and less ponderous than using twin projectors, two large screens and a vulnerable, film based medium.

**Future Objective:** To this end new technology now makes it possible to assemble visuals and words for a travelling exhibition, a book and a C.D.Rom data base from which electronically paired images can be projected.

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To approach my **Above & Below** project more effectively I now wish to employ new technologies that make it possible to assemble visuals and text with immense flexibility so they

can be presented as a travelling art exhibition; as a C.D.Rom database from which electronically paired images can be projected; and as an art book celebrating biodiversity.

I have created a sequence of photographic images from above water and below, linked by text panels, which compare life patterns so that overall, a meta pattern emerges for the viewer: the underlying "pattern that connects" which can only be inferred and processed by the artistic part of the mind.

Firstly, my images were processed in electronic form from digitally scanned transparencies. They were then be available for colour printing and exhibition display along with complementary text panels.

In electronic form my project can be presented as an exhibition of mounted prints; as a multi platform C.D.Rom; in a C.D. Rom projection theatre, possibly in conjunction with a print display; or in conventional publishing form, as a book.

\_\_\_\_\_While I am inspired by the inscapes of poet G.M. Hopkins and his drawings, I would claim originality in that few people have looked at length at such radically different worlds in quest of underlying relationships.

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