

How Peru fell in love with a sea giant worth far more alive than dead

Seascope: the state of our oceans

Peru

The giant manta ray is at risk in the Pacific ocean, but the rise of ecotourism is changing attitudes among local fishermen

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About this content

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The manta ray tourism model in Peru is helping to protect rays and their habitat. Photograph: Martin Strmiska/Getty Images

Fishermen heading out to sea off Peru's northern coast keep a keen eye on the turquoise waters below them, hoping for a glimpse of the elusive giant manta ray gliding by.

Nowadays the boats are taking tourists rather than nets. The fish they once caught are now in decline, and the fish the visitors want to see now are worth far more alive than dead.

This wildlife-rich stretch of the eastern tropical Pacific shared with Ecuador is home to one of the largest populations of the world's biggest ray – the giant manta – and the local community, led by marine scientist Kerstin Forsberg, is trying to conserve the creatures.

These ocean-going giants are targeted for their gill plates, used in Chinese medicine, or, more commonly in Peruvian waters, they become entangled in fishing nets. With a wingspan that can measure as much as nine metres across, the giant manta rays have declined by up to a third globally and are classified as **vulnerable on the red list** of the International Union for Conservation of Nature.



Giant mantas can become entangled in local fishing nets. Photograph: 2018 Whitley Awards

“This species was really overlooked in my country,” says Forsberg, 34. But that is no longer the case in Zorritos, a village arranged along a stretch of Peru's west-facing Pacific coastline.

In eight years, Forsberg has changed the mentality here towards the mantas. She has helped create a fisherman's association focused on ecotourism encouraging local and foreign visitors to observe or even swim with the rays. The Guardian spotted rays leaping out of the sea and swimming close to the boat on one of these trips.