

# Seaweed



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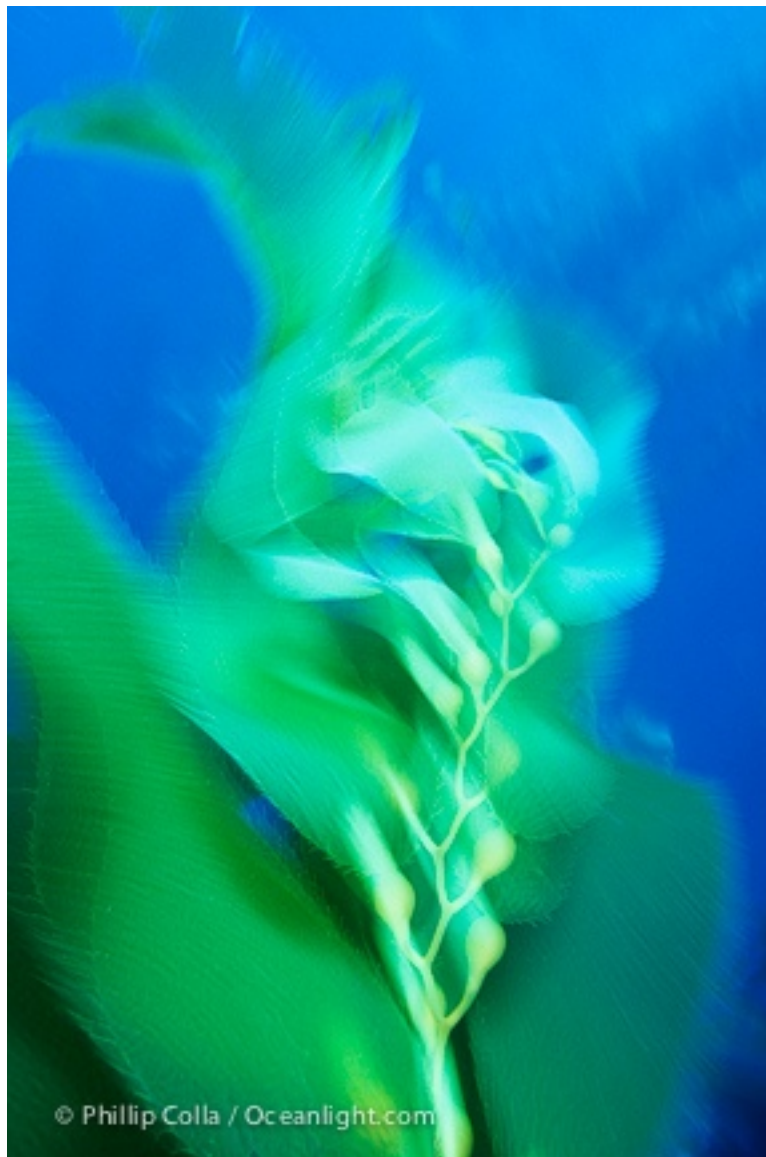
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My first experience with seaweed was as a kid combing the shores of Newport Beach. After storms my brother and I would find clumps of the brown stuff pushed up the beach. We would pick through them to pop the small bubbles attached to the leaves. If the seaweed was fresh and still had its rootball attached, we would break it apart to reveal a mix of tiny animals: brittle



stars, baby octopus, urchins, crabs, little shells and worms. The glimpses of marine life that seaweed brought to our shore triggered a childhood curiosity in the ocean and its inhabitants. Yet it was not until I began diving in kelp that a fascination with the ocean world really took hold of me.

It is my spirited opinion, one that I enjoy defending over a beer after a long day on the water, that diving amidst giant kelp is the most magnificent diving in the world. I am fortunate enough to have had some amazing experiences underwater – watching swarms of hammerheads soar overhead, riding the broad back of an accommodating manta, being eyeballed by an inquisitive whale. However, the diving I consider most dear is that found in the splendid kelp forests along the coast and offshore islands of California. Vast beds of giant kelp (*Macrocystis pyrifera*) line the shore, rising from rocky reefs nearly 100' deep to reach the surface before spreading out to



form a thick floating canopy. Underneath this canopy, the sensation of swimming amid the

columns of kelp plants is akin to flying through a terrestrial forest. Corridors between kelp stalks lead to wide openings in the forest in which schools of fish hover. Shafts of light filtered by the canopy above fall across kelp to the reef below. When the current shifts and bends the kelp stalks in a new direction the topology of the forest changes, creating new avenues and rooms to explore.



Central and Northern California kelp forests are bathed by cold, nutrient-laden currents. The waters here are generally not clear but are rich with animal life. Invertebrate displays on the rocks below the kelp forest are some of the most profuse and interesting in the world and it is

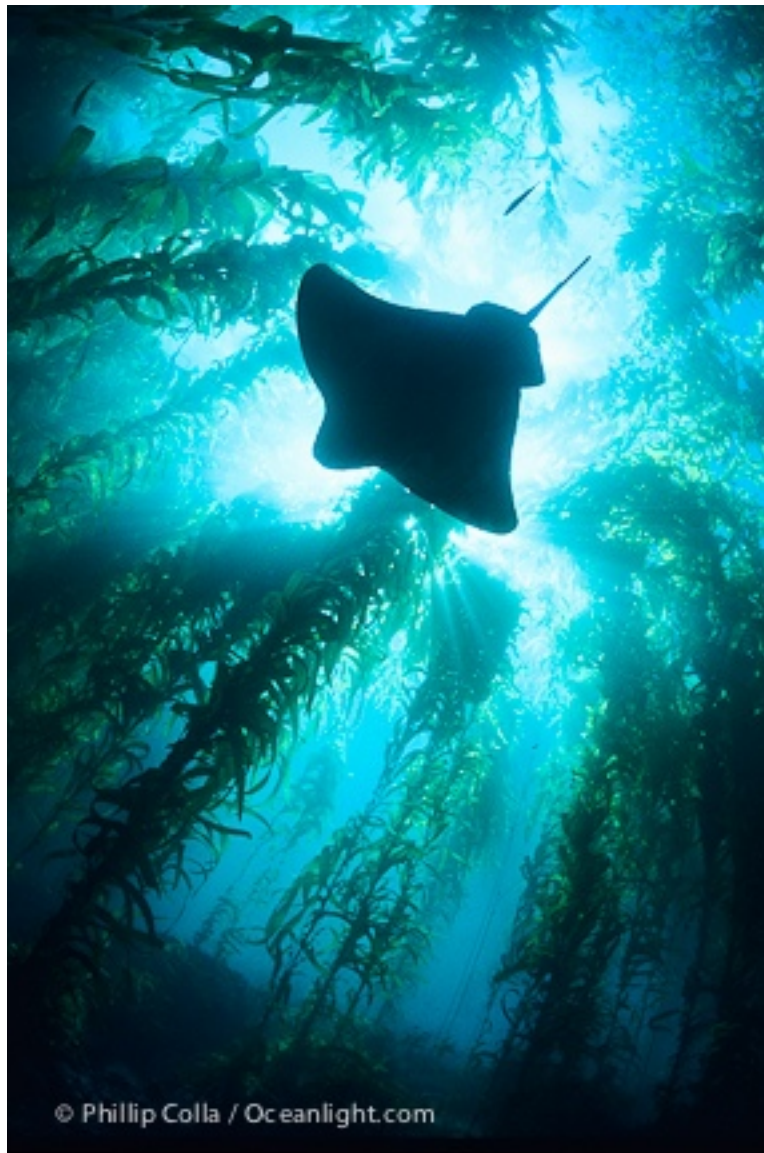
common to see large schools of rockfish and pelagic jellies hovering among the kelp. Kelp forests here breed some of the world's hardest divers, those who manage year-round dry suits, beach entries and surface swims, winter swells and the distinct possibility of meeting white sharks in murky water just to dive in *Macrocystis*.

Further to the south, Santa Barbara and Catalina Island kelp forests offer somewhat less profuse animal life but warmer and clearer waters. While I don't dive these two islands often anymore, I do dive kelp originating from these islands throughout the summer: drift kelp. I was introduced to the notion of seeking out floating paddies of kelp by bluewater photographer Mike Johnson and have been hooked ever since. It is a strange pursuit, driving miles of open ocean in search of drifting kelp in the hope of finding something under it. You see, kelp plants that lose their



hold on the reef continue to float and grow, drifting with the winds and currents until they are beached or reach warm water. Along the way they gather a variety of passengers including juvenile fish, *Medialuna* eggs, barnacles and pelagic nudibranchs. Paddies and their passengers further attract a variety of open ocean life: diving birds, bait fish, tuna and marlin, blue and mako sharks. Perhaps the oddest of these visitors is the ocean sunfish (*Mola mola*), which recruits small fishes at paddies to clean it of parasites – a cleaning station for the largest bony fish in the world, miles from shore in deep oceanic water, circling a scrap of drifting seaweed.

However, when the goal is simply to swim in and admire a kelp forest, nothing beats the (relatively) warm clear waters of Southern California's San Clemente Island in late summer. On a good day the panorama at San Clemente is stunning: kelp in all directions reaching from seafloor to surface, summer sun and canopy shadow constantly changing, fish swimming the avenues of the forest and visible over a 100' away. One is enveloped – literally – by life as far as one can see, an effect I have experienced only a few times, and fleetingly, elsewhere in the



ocean. On a day like this I'll spend as much time in the water as possible, staying just below the surface to take advantage of the wonderful quality and variety of sunlight in the canopy, waiting for subjects to photograph against a backdrop of kelp. There are always garibaldi, kelp bass, various wrasses and juvenile fish hidden among kelp fronds to photograph year-round. It is



September and October – the magical Indian summer months at Clemente – that are my favorite as they have brought torpedo and bat rays, seals and sea lions, huge schools of salema and mackeral and enormous sea bass though the forest in front of my lens: wonderful animals in a spectacular setting to spite my limited ability to capture them on film.



It is easy to lose other divers and find solitude in a kelp forest. Sometimes I will spy another diver hovering in the forest staring up and around at the kelp rising on all sides of him, as if in a trance. Either he is totally lost or simply enjoying the surroundings – either way, I know how he feels. At times I do the same thing, finding a particularly enchanting spot and shooting all my

film on the weeds themselves in an attempt to get one perfect photograph of the kelp forest. It's a photograph I will likely never achieve. The kelp forest is too grand to adequately capture on film. I'll keep working on it, though.