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MACY ANUONEVO
RE-DISCOVERS
EL NIDO

WE GO ON DECK
AND REVIEW THE NEW
PRINCESS 60 YACHT



FLOATING WITH THE TIDE

*How a biologist ended up on
an island resort and stayed
there*

BY MACY AÑONUEVO



WHEN YOU THINK OF POSSIBLE jobs for a Biology graduate, the tourism industry isn't exactly the first thing that comes to mind, even more so if the potential employer is a luxury island resort. Yet here I am almost five years and a graduate program later, still at my first job as an Environmental Officer for El Nido Resorts in El Nido, Palawan and loving every day of it.

I found out about the job through the most mundane way possible: a university job fair. As I wandered through the maze of company booths, at a loss on what to do for the next phase of my life, ENR's images of white sand and blue water were siren calls that cut through the haze and endless chatter.

As an Environmental Officer for Miniloc Island Resort, one of my most important and most rewarding duties is to be the "main point of contact for environmental expertise for guests and staff". Over the years, this has come to mean identifying the animals a guest took photos of while out on their activities (be it island hopping, snorkeling, or diving) and creating materials such as guidebooks and flashcards to increase our guests' enjoyment of their El Nido experience. This duty also extends online to our potential guests and others interested in learning more about El Nido, as I (along with the rest of the Environment team) maintain a website and blog on what we do. This is where we post articles on

the interesting critters our guests may see in El Nido and upload "Enchanting El Nido", the online nature show that we write, produce, direct, star in, and edit.

For a more in-depth look at El Nido's natural environment, the Environmental Officers for Miniloc, Lagen, and Apulit Island Resorts host the twice weekly Green Hour, where we showcase some of the interesting plants and animals found in El Nido, as well as some of the things that El Nido Resorts does in order to be a responsible tourism operator. We do the presentations at the bar area just before dinner to attract the most guests. The last guests I talked to after the Green Hour presentation wanted to know how



AN AMAZING THING ABOUT WORKING IN EL NIDO IS THAT THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW TO DISCOVER RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER.

fast a cuttlefish can change its color and texture and where to go snorkeling to spot a sea turtle.

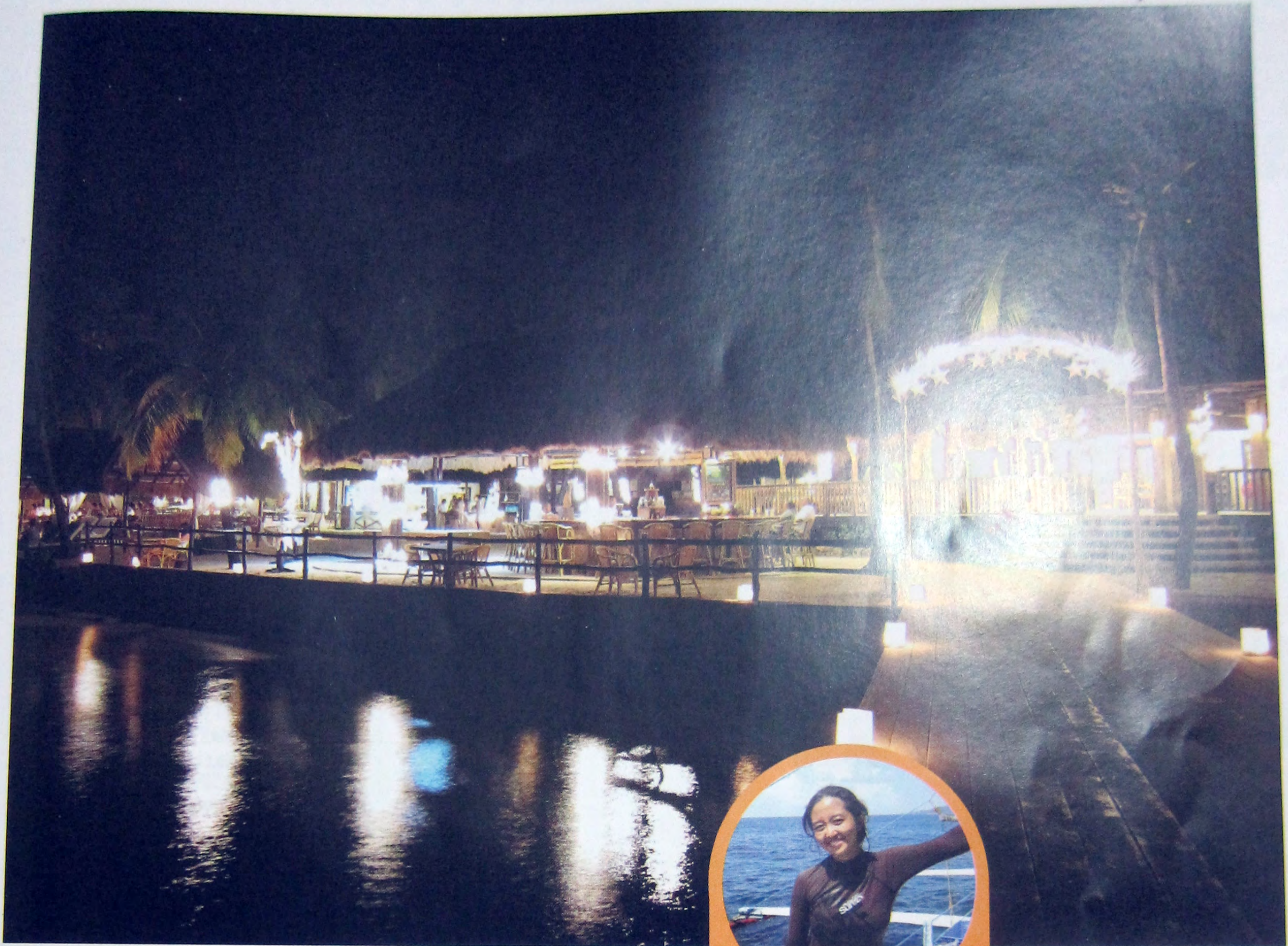
An amazing thing about working in El Nido is that there's always something new to discover right around the corner. On my first day on the job, I got to transfer sea turtle eggs from one beach to another to keep them safe from monitor lizards and other predators. A year later, I got to watch a different batch of hawksbill sea turtle hatchlings crawl out of their nest and race towards the ocean. During my last week of work before leaving for graduate school, we spotted a flock of Palawan hornbills hanging around in the trees behind the Managers' Quarters in Lagen. The photo I took of this flock, with one bird sitting separate from the rest, is still one of my favorites. The first time I saw a hawksbill sea turtle while snorkeling was during the fieldwork I and the Environment team did for my master's thesis. There's always something new if you keep your eyes peeled and your heart open to the possibilities.

Another thing that makes El Nido special is that the people who work here are as equally concerned about the environment as I am. The staff volunteer their off-duty hours for coastal and underwater cleanups with only banana cake and souvenir stickers as thank-you gifts. I've had concerned staff members bring me a young rufous night heron that fell out of its nest and a young black-naped tern that couldn't fly away. They get excited when they tell me about how they applied the environmental practices they learned from the Be GREEN (Guard, Respect, Educate El Nido) environmental practices training seminars and experienced the financial savings. Coworkers that share your passion make everything worthwhile.

As with any other job, this one has its fair share of challenges. Please note that my background is primarily coral reef ecology and I haven't finished my graduate thesis yet. Despite these, I've been asked to identify a snake based

only on the vaguest of descriptions (black, long, with a pointed head), even though the Philippines is home to hundreds of species of snake. Concerned staff members wanted the resident doctor (for humans!) and I to look after a large water monitor lizard that had bloody scratches on its belly. Doc Raymond and I went to Cove 2 with his rolling medical kit even though we couldn't do anything for the lizard. People expect you to know why jellyfish abound during a certain time of the year and the name of the bird they heard that morning. The other EOs and I cannot know everything there is to know about El Nido but we need to be at least two steps ahead.

Another challenge is perhaps one we've brought onto ourselves: the very high expectations that guests have of us on the environment front. Yes, we promote ourselves as an eco resort. Yes, we've taken steps towards using renewable energy to power the resorts. Yes, we have a sewage treatment plant, a desalination plant, and



a rainwater catchment system. However, we are far from perfect and sometimes, we just cannot meet these expectations due to the limitations of our business and our location. First and foremost, we operate luxury island resorts. Municipal fishermen brought an injured hawksbill sea turtle to our Environmental Enforcement Officer, and he in turn brought it to me. The turtle couldn't dive and stay underwater. Some guests wanted us to bring the turtle to a veterinarian. There is a veterinarian in El Nido but his specialty is farm animals. They insisted that we bring him to the wildlife rescue center in Puerto Princesa. Unfortunately, the land trip to Puerto Princesa from El Nido takes six hours and would stress the turtle. I called wildlife veterinarian Dr. Terry Aquino, who advised us to insert a tube into the turtle's intestinal tract via the anus as the turtle might have gas in its intestines. We did this but didn't see any improvements. Undaunted, the guests researched online and found a turtle rescue center in Bataan that might take the turtle. We couldn't fly the turtle out as the aircraft used by Island Transvoyager Inc. (our partner airline) are non-pressurized. The gas in the turtle's gut would expand and cause his intestines to pop - not something we want happening. Despite seeing our best efforts in action, the guests let us know in no uncertain terms that our reputation as an eco

resort rested on the fate of this single turtle. We had no business calling ourselves an eco resort if we couldn't save this one turtle. This story has a happy ending via a second opinion from Dr. Rizza Salinas, who told us that the air might be in the turtle's body cavity instead of the gut. I ended up aspirating over 200cc of air from the body cavity using a syringe and releasing a turtle that slapped our hands when we lifted him off the table to release. But what if it hadn't worked? What if this turtle, despite everything we did, died in our care? Should we be held morally liable for its death? Some guests seemed to think so. They also think that our small steps to invest in solar energy are not enough. Even though we do want to invest more, we cannot afford to do so at present.

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I'm very glad to be among the few people who can say that they found the right job for them right out of college. As I said in the beginning, the tourism industry isn't something that usually comes to mind when you think of jobs for a biologist. But perhaps it's time to change that. More and more people are interested in visiting natural places and treading lightly where they visit, and who better to help them appreciate just how special these natural places are than a biologist? The best part is that you don't need to leave the Philippines to do this. The Philippines abounds in natural areas that need funding for preservation. With their conservation mindset, biologists can help guide tourism players to financial success while preserving the foundation for their business: the environment.