

# On the Reef

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

We swam out from the beach and across the shallow reef flat. The water gradually deepened, turning from the palest of aquamarines to rich sapphire hues. Suddenly it was a clear and limitless cobalt blue; we had passed over the outer edge of the reef. We started our descent down to the undersea cliff below, passed its lip, and continued farther down along the precipitous seaward wall. Fish of all sizes scattered before us, flickering and shimmering in the blades of blue-white sunlight. At 65 feet we leveled off, right in front of a cluster of plantlike animals the Japanese call *umishida*. It means 'sea fern' and is both descriptive and poetic at the same time, as are many of the Japanese names for things of the sea.

I was hovering there, trying as gracefully as possible to handle the cumbersome underwater photographic gear. Stray thoughts kept pushing into my mind, and I tried to push them out with decreasing success. One simple thought kept on persisting until it dominated my thoughts: what a wondrous archipelago this is. Not just this island of Okinawa off whose reef I was diving, but the whole of Japan, stretching from the near-arctic Sea of Okhotsk on the north

to the Southwest Islands just a stone's throw from the Tropic of Cancer. Few nations possess any environmental variety like this, and certainly none with a land area as small as Japan's.

When I first came to Japan over 10 years ago, the harrying pace of life in Tokyo blinded me to much of the natural and human diversity with which these islands are blessed. Over the years, I have come to see what is beyond the crowded and gray and angular life of the city. What surprises me is that many urban Japanese are aware of the same thing, but it causes no wonder to stir in their breasts. In fact, the beauty of this archipelago seems to many here to be a thing to be managed or controlled or 'developed' into boring cityscapes or suburbanscapes or tourist-trapscapes, to coin a couple of new terms. Although traditional Japanese culture stressed the interplay of human culture and the natural world around it, the modern business culture—which is not unique to Japan—sees the natural world as a complex of economic resources and not much more. And that is indeed a shame, especially in such a rich and beautiful place.

There are groups and individuals who

are passionately devoted to this natural heritage, but they are in the main disconnected from the processes that make and implement relevant policy. Their voices tend to be distant, drowned out by the rush and hubbub of the urban moneymaking machine. But they are there, and they are the seed.

The *umishida* waved its feathery arms in the current as I finished my photography and gently backed off from the reef wall. I glanced up at my silvery bubbles making haste to the surface above. In a few moments, I thought, my partner and I must do the same. I looked back at the *umishida* and silently thanked it for the thoughts that had come in its presence. In equal silence the *umishida* continued softly waving in the current as its ancestors have done for hundreds of millions of years. And that was reply enough.

*Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.*

