

For Kihei man, there is life beyond snorkel gear

With 15 published novels, Snorkel Bob is focusing next on reef protection

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Most on Maui know Robert Wintner as the founder of Snorkel Bob's gear shops, but the 67-year-old Kihei resident is also an accomplished author.

Wintner recently released two books: "1969 & Then Some" and "Brainstorm." The first is a tribute to the 1960s and '70s as a "golden age" that resonated with Wintner, who was a college student at the time. The memoir follows his experience with romance, motorcycles and psychedelic drugs. "Brainstorm" chronicles his experience firsthand as a caretaker of his wife, Anita, who had suffered a sudden massive hemorrhage and cerebral aneurysm.

Including his latest two books, Wintner has written 15 published novels, including "Sweet Magnolia Time," which was nominated for a Pulitzer prize, and two other novels that were optioned for movie production in Los Angeles (neither was fully realized as a movie). He finished his first book, "Whirlaway," in 1992, which was an account of his trip from California to Maui on a sailboat with five others in 1983.

Article Photos



Robert Wintner, who started Snorkel Bob's gear shops, emerges from the waters off Copacabana in Cuba during a recent dive trip. The accomplished author has just released two books and is already working on others that highlight the need for more reef protections.

ROBERT WINTNER photo

When asked what it's like to be a writer on Maui, Wintner, who grew up in Indiana, described the process as "challenging" and, at times, "frustrating."

"There is a world out there happening, so one of the big challenges of being here is trying to help bring Hawaii into modern times," he said.

But his Snorkel Bob's business helps him interact with visitors from around the world and brings more voices to Hawaii, he said.

The snorkel gear company has been in business for 30 years. Looking back, Wintner said the beginnings of Snorkel Bob's was "mostly a short-term outing to make a little money." From a little storefront in Kihei, he began offering a rental package of snorkel mask, goggles and fins for \$10 a week, and "there was a line out the door since day one," he said. "I think anybody could've done it because there was a demand . . . but the reason it worked out for us as well as it has is because the love shows," he said.

Snorkel Bob's empire has since expanded to include stores on Kauai, Oahu and Hawaii island, as well as six on Maui. The business employs 65 to 70 people, Wintner said. "You can shop anywhere USA. You can see a show anywhere USA. There's only one thing you cannot do anywhere USA and that's snorkel. And it's the best thing to do here," Wintner said.

Recognizing the need for better quality snorkel gear, Snorkel Bob's began designing and manufacturing its own snorkel masks, goggles and fins about 15 years ago. Now, they're available for purchase or rent.

Wintner has long revered the reef and its healing properties, which helped pull him out of a period of depression after he first arrived in the islands. He wants to share the experience with residents and visitors. Snorkel Bob's strives to protect the reefs and stopped selling fish food and sunscreen in all of its stores after Wintner learned the products were affecting the marine ecosystem, he said. While he admits that the boom in tourism has taken a toll on the reefs, he is actively fighting against another threat - the aquarium trade.

"Hawaii is the most important source of reef fish to the aquarium trade. Hawaii gains nothing and gives up much," he wrote in an article for The Huffington Post in 2011. He has advocated for various county and state bills to prohibit the sale or collection of Hawaii's reef fish. Earlier this year, state legislators deferred House Bill 873, which would have banned the sale of aquatic life for aquarium purposes.

"The situation here is really bad, politically speaking. . . . It just tends to be status quo with all deference given to commercial extraction and the word 'pono' has no commercial caveat," he said. "I do think every aquarium should come down, because every fish on every reef is a soldier in the struggle for recovery."

His fight for more marine life protections will serve as inspiration for his next two books, "Reef Libre" and "Dragon Walk." He and his wife recently dove pristine reefs off the coasts of Cuba, the Philippines and Singapore, protected marine reserves that may offer insight into how Hawaii reefs once looked or could look again with more conservation efforts. For more information, go to www.robertwintner.com.

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