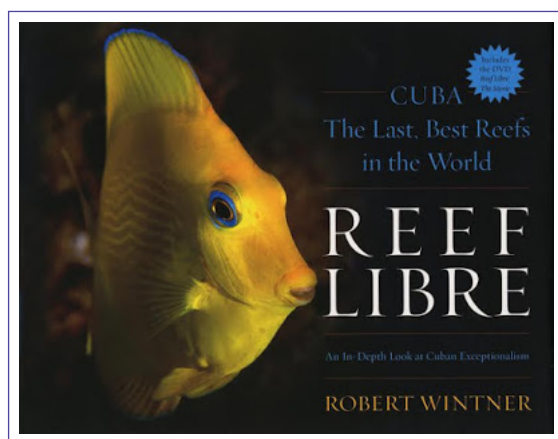


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Oct 22, 2015

## Book/DVD Review and Author Interview: Reef Libre by Robert Wintner



**Great quote:** "Cuba can be soulful and loving. The Cuban people show indomitable spirit and artistry, and the Cuban countryside is storybook beautiful. The jewels in the crown are Cuba's reefs and the zeal to protect them." (Page 131)

**Book summary:** Cuba reefs host apex predators and coral cover at optimal levels. While Cuban reef vitality may be linked to economic default and no shoreline development, no agricultural pesticides or fertilizers and limited human population growth, the Castro regime is aggressively developing its reef potential. Seas to the south are now 100% shark protected.

Most Cuba travelogues advise "getting off the beaten path," but [Reef Libre](#) examines that path, to see where it might lead as things change. Will Cuba reefs remain protected? Or is this perilous age of natural decline a last chance to see a healthy reef system?

Robert Wintner and the Snorkel Bob Jardines de la Reina Expedition herein provide narrative insight with photos and video. First stop is the baseline: Havana urban density. Down south at Cayo Largo, reef collapse seems imminent with 600 guests changing daily, and the phosphate-laden laundry water flowing directly to the deep blue sea. Will Cuba's Ministry of Tourism step up with the Jardines de la Reina paradigm? Rising from the Golfo de Ana Maria, Jardines is a thousand square miles of mangrove estuary, for ages compromised by constant extraction of its biggest predators, taken as food. Protected, it now rises on the world reef stage. (iRead)

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Spotted Drum Juvie Dance

Image: [RobertWintner.com](http://RobertWintner.com)

**My thoughts:** Snorkel Bob is a Hawaiian institution on a crusade to save the world's ocean reefs from the unnecessary decimation by the unregulated aquarium fish trade. Cuba has been closed for decades, which has inadvertently resulted in some of the most pristine and well-protected reefs in the world. Robert Wintner (a.k.a. Snorkel Bob) traveled to Cuba to document, and hopefully preserve, some of the world's most fabulous reefs. His journey is chronicled in the book and accompanying DVD, [Reef Libre](#).

The photography in this book is amazing. I have never been snorkeling or on an ocean dive, so I was mesmerized by the images captured by Wintner and his team. Likewise, the DVD was even more astounding. The video documenting the wildlife of Cuba's reefs is amazing, even if the DVD's banter between two narrators is as cheesy as a two aging DJs on early morning AM radio station.

Wintner has a unique writing voice, one that is heard also in the accompanying DVD also titled [Reef Libre](#). Wintner writes in what I call a "stream of consciousness" style, rambling and passionate, but not always the easiest to follow. As a result, [Reef Libre](#) is a photography-based travel memoir that is also part political missive with a dash of salty sea captain.

Cuba has re-emerged in the news lately with politics dictating the newest push towards America's relations with Cuba. The Cuba of today will shortly be vanishing with the rush of tourism dollars and the greed of entrepreneurs hoping to cash in on an untapped but eager market in Cuba. With great care and dignity, perhaps Cuba will be able to manage its resources wisely and protect the beauty that thrives there. Thanks to books such as [Reef Libre](#) by [Robert Wintner](#), the public can make informed and educated decisions regarding Cuba and the worldwide aquarium trade.



Shark Confidential

Image: [RobertWintner.com](http://RobertWintner.com)

**Author Interview:** Author Robert Wintner was kind enough to answer a few questions that I had after reading [Reef Libre](#):

*Lavish Bookshelf: In the short time since you traveled to Cuba, relations between The United States and Cuba have*

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thawed. Your book, *Reef Libre*, is especially fortuitous with its timing and the growing interest in all things Cuba. Did you have any inkling on your trip that changes in diplomatic relations would happen so shortly after your visit?

Robert Wintner: I stumbled onto a few assessments of Jardines de la Reina and Cuba flora and fauna in general that fairly went under the radar. Every assessment proclaimed astounding revelations on unspoiled habitat—nature in optimal health as last seen on Planet Earth 50 years ago. Besides terrestrial species thought extinct that survive in Cuba, the reef systems there scored 100% on the Big 3 reef standards: 1) coral cover, 2) Apex predators, 3) bio-diversity. No other reef system in the world came close. And not too many people were paying attention. Connecting the dots from there was easy. Both Fidel and Raul are past 85, so political change is imminent. We travel the world seeking unique examples of reef dynamics that may allow reefs to survive. I know that tourism is a lesser evil to development, but feared the onslaught that seemed inevitable. Now it's underway, so yes: we hurried down to Cuba to document extremely rare conditions before they get challenged.

*Lavish Bookshelf: Your book tells of Fidel Castro declaring a ban on shark meat, which led to the overall protection of the Cuban reef system. The reefs thrived in Cuba's closed society. Given the thawing relations and unavoidable rush of tourists to the region, do you feel Cuba is prepared to protect its reef system in the future?*

Robert Wintner: Of course that's the big question. The answer is multi-layered and nuanced. Fidel's ban on shark meat was either a very lucky guess or savant. Fidel was an angler and a spear fisherman, so maybe he had an inkling on the value of sharks in ocean habitat and species recovery. We can only speculate—but he also banned spear fishing, seine trawlers that destroy bottom habitat on every seine and generally allowed the big predators to return. Scientific consensus held that such a return would decimate fish populations, what they called "trophic cascading," but the opposite proved true, yielding maximum abundance and bio-diversity. The big challenge as profiled in *Reef Libre* is that the Cuban people are very hungry and tired of fried butter. Only private restaurants (paladars) serve seafood, nearly all of it flown in from South Florida—nearly all caught in collapsing fisheries around the world. Who the hell knows what will give? Now Raul is aligning with Bashar al-Assad in Syria. We can parse the details and maybe get it right. I personally think that Raul going against the U.S. in Syria may be a good sign for reef protection—for saying no to the onslaught of tourist dollars and the extreme demand for something to eat and the money to buy it. I think protecting these reefs will be very difficult, but my friends in Cuba swear they will maintain current standards.



Blue Tang Flourish  
Image: RobertWintner.com

*Lavish Bookshelf: Do you have another trip to Cuba in the works? Trips to any other countries planned?*

Robert Wintner: Since *Cuba* and *Reef Libre*, the Snorkel Bob Expedition crew has visited the two countries most plagued with aquarium extraction/devastation—the two places in the world where aquarium collectors still blow up reefs with dynamite or worse—open ampules of cyanide over reefs. Dynamite and cyanide destroys reef habitat instantly and stuns reef species. They float to the surface. About 2/3 die. The rest recover for shortened lives spent in glass tanks. While dynamite seems more dramatic, cyanide is worse; it does not dissipate. It accumulates. All waters in the Coral Triangle are now compromised from aquarium trade cyanide. We visited specific reefs in both countries where the aquarium trade is banned. Dumaguete is on the island of Negros in the Philippines and is vastly lush with habitat and critters, in a reef tourism industry that allows people the lives they were so long without. Not too far away, very poor people are still exploited with pennies for exotic reef wildlife that won't come back. Likewise, Komodo National Park in Indonesia is a World Heritage Site, tiny but profound in showing what reefs can do if left unscathed.

We also visited home reefs in Hawaii. The next book will be *Dragon Walk, Reef Recovery & Political Will*. This subject, like all others, is political and has far less to do with public consensus than political machination. The aquarium trade is a \$4-5 billion industry that can afford to buy people in key positions. A few standout politicians

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showing vertebrate postures may make the difference. Meanwhile, all reefs are now (in the last 30-60 days) severely oppressed by a global bleaching event. Survival and recovery will require a strong immune system. Reef wildlife is that system, yet the aquarium trade blithely continues its wanton pillage—for a few dollars more.

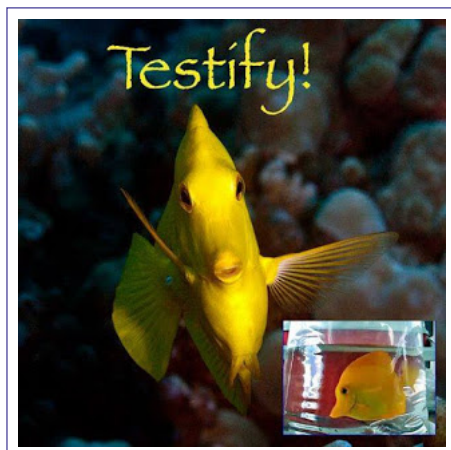


Image: Author Robert Wintner Facebook Page

*Lavish Bookshelf: You have dedicated the proceeds from [Reef Libre](#) to the campaign to ban the aquarium trade worldwide, a cause you have wholeheartedly endorsed in Hawaii. Can you explain how others can learn more about the problem of aquarium trade? Have you seen any successes in your fight against fish poaching?*

Robert Wintner: I may be naïve in assuming the innate ability of all people to know the difference between right and wrong. I know that children get it immediately, and I think most people keep it as they mature, though some are compromised by greed and some are just ornery and hateful. The aquarium trade is a last vestige of trafficking in wildlife for an amusement industry. That traffic has spelled doom every time for source habitat and species and for destination habitat and species. From alligators in the NY sewer system to Burmese pythons in South Florida to decimated parrot/macaw populations in South America and primates in Asia, it's a loss. Now we have lionfish, a beautiful creature who lives in balance in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, delivered to the Atlantic and Caribbean by a voracious aquarium trade that will say or do anything to keep the revenue going. We have opened millions of eyes, minds and hearts to this nasty situation. Where most people saw glass tanks in passing and thought nothing of the wildlife inside or assumed that someone grew those fish, now they see the truth and the devastating cost. Now humans have a chance to show humanity, and most want to do just that. Poaching is one and the same with aquarium collecting. Hawaii is the classic example, where reported catch is a small fraction of actual catch.

*(Lavish Bookshelf's note: You can learn more about Snorkel Bob's campaign to ban the aquarium fish trade on the [Snorkel Bob](#) website.)*



Ooohh Baby...Queen Triggerfish

Image: RobertWintner.com

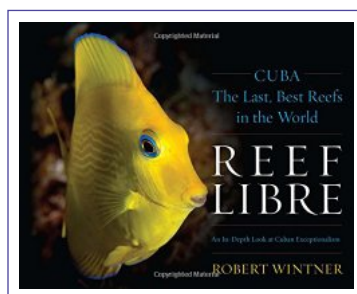
**Rating: 4.5 of 5 stars**

#### Book Facts:



- **Pages:** 266
- **DVD Run Time:** Approximately one hour
- **Year originally published:** 2015
- **Author:** Best known as Snorkel Bob in Hawaii and around the world, Robert Wintner captures Cuba above and below the surface with urgency and hope. As a pioneer in fish portraiture, Wintner demonstrated social structure and etiquette in reef society. [Reef Libre](#) goes to political context, in which human folly will squander Cuba's reefs as well—unless natural values can at last transcend political greed. As pundits joust over who did what to whom and why, Wintner ponders reef prospects in view of political changes. Robert Wintner has authored many novels and story collections. [Reef Libre](#) is his fourth reef commentary with photos and his first overview of survival potential in a political maelstrom. He lives and works in Hawaii, still on the front lines of the campaign to stop the aquarium trade around the world.
- **Connect with the author:** [Website](#) ~ [Facebook](#)
- **You might want to know:** A DVD comes with the book in a paper sleeve glued to the inside cover.
- **Book Tour:** My review is part of a larger collection of reviews on the same title. For more information, please visit [iRead Book Tours](#).

**Purchase on Amazon:** [Reef Libre: CubaThe Last, Best Reefs in the World](#)



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## 2 comments:

**Robert Wintner** said...

Thanks, Lavish Bookshelf, for your thoughtful, comprehensive review--and thanks for the compelling questions.

[October 23, 2015 at 2:14 PM](#)

**Lavish Bookshelf** said...

Robert, thank you so much for stopping by my blog! I wish you all the best success in your future quests to spotlight reef destruction and the tragedies of the aquarium trade!

[October 23, 2015 at 5:05 PM](#)

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