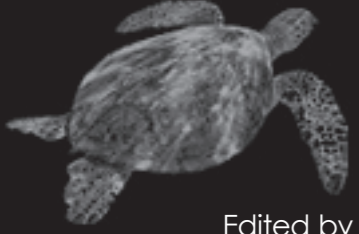


turtle tales



Edited by
Peter Symes

Text and photos
by Kufraiser

Leatherback Expedition

— *a report from S.O.L.O.*





PREVIOUS PAGE: Almost hatched
LEFT: Baby leatherback; Foraging
leatherback off Oregon, US (inset);
Leatherback Rock (bottom)

Leatherback butchered for its skin (right);
Leatherback came ashore to die (lower right)

boat.

Enroute to the Leatherback nesting beaches, divers have an opportunity to see some WWII planes, ships and ammunition in waters of 70 feet or less. Snorkelers and beach explorers have other neat experiences available to them as non-divers.

Time at the Leatherback beaches takes about two days and one night in order to gain a meaningful experience with

The locals

I had been curious for some time as to how accurate the Papuan men are with their bows and arrows, as the bows are bent bamboo, the bow string is of bamboo, and the arrows are often crooked with no feathers or a notch to fit the bow string. I challenged the village men to shoot at a 3 x 5 inch target placed at 15 meters (about 45 feet). ALL hit that small target.



S.O.L.O. 2008 Expeditions
a terrific success —Papua Barat,
Indonesia, 20 March 2009

Save Our Leatherbacks Operation (SOLO) completed its fourth year of expeditions to the Leatherback turtle nesting beaches located in very remote Papua Barat, Indonesia. Each summer between May and October, between two and four expeditions are conducted for the direct benefit of both scuba divers and others who are keen to see, film and touch this living dinosaur from the past.

The Leatherback sea turtle is in its exact form as it existed about 150 million years ago. When the ice age froze out the huge

creatures, this Leatherback went into the sea and survived. An Expedition participant has a very rare opportunity to actually interact with an existing real life dinosaur from the Jurassic period while they still exist.

Humanity's increasing and wanton destruction of our seas is causing a spiral into extinction of this, the largest sea turtle and reptile on Earth.

In 2008, as in past years, we held two expeditions of 14 people each between July 14 and August 6. Each sortie lasted 11 days and 10 nights. The expeditions go first to the Leatherback nesting beaches to the East of Sorong, the port of embarkation on a quality live aboard



these giant Leatherback females as they come from the sea in the dark of night to nest. Males never appear unless injured.

Day periods at the beach include an opportunity to interact with residents of two remote villages where our research staffs reside and witnessing of an almost forgotten "Leatherback Calling Ceremony" by villagers in tribal costume, complete with bamboo bows and arrows to call the

Leatherback females to the beach that night (so far, works every time).

(except me) The village chief drilled the center of the target. WHEW! Don't get THESE Papuans angry!

The nights on this 18 km long beach are the most exciting part of the three-phase trip. We go to the beach after a fine dinner on the boat, at about 9 p.m. All dress well to protect from being gnawed on by the always present "No See Em's", but at times even a 100 percent bath in Deet does not repel them.

We go ashore at Leatherback Rock, usually in calm surf, to be met by the villagers who become our guides in search of the Leatherbacks. Their eyes see a lot more than ours, and they have local knowledge of the



Leatherback habits. We have them equipped with hand held radios.

We all make a comfortable sand dune seat or bed and marvel at the stars, which are so bright in the no pollution air, we can almost grab one. Last trip, I counted 25 shooting stars and one decaying satellite on a burn back into our atmosphere.

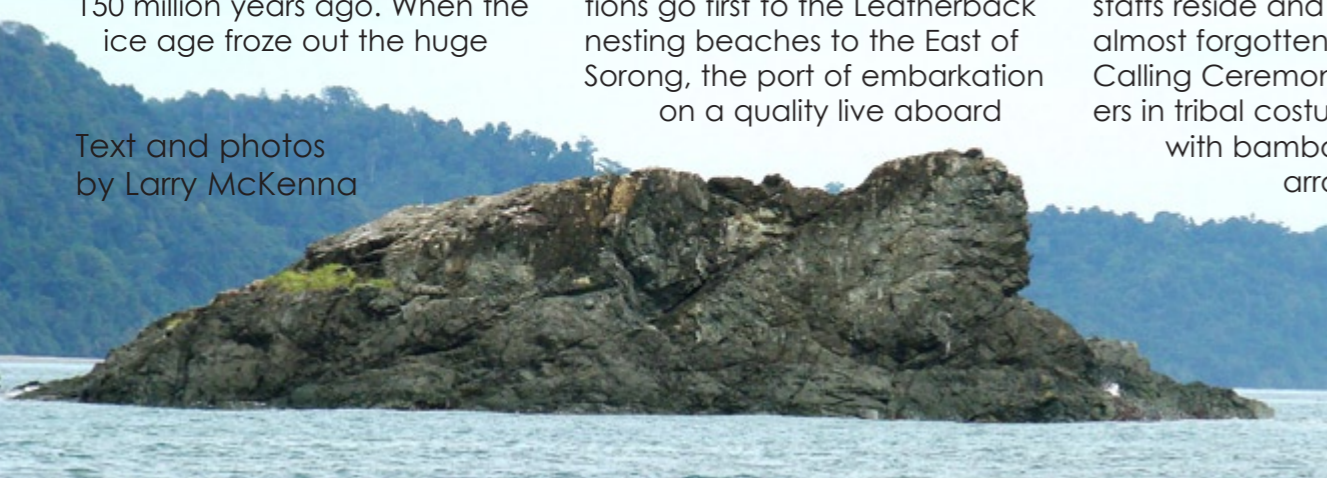
After a brief wait, hooded lights begin to flash up and down the beach as our native staff locates a

female crawling from the sea to find the spot where she was hatched to dig her nest and lay clutches of up to 100 eggs.

We scramble to the location in small groups so as not to 'spook' the Leatherback and wait to approach her until she is digging the nest hole and begins to drop her eggs.

The process requires from 1 to 1.5 hours, so there is plenty of time for photos and examining the

Text and photos
by Larry McKenna





CLOCKWISE: Adult female leatherback; Dropping her eggs; McKenna with locals in traditional dress; Turtle calling ceremony; Equatorial sunrise; Tony Raja's leatherback



entire hatching event. Many sit beside her and stroke the soft, velvet-like skin that protects her massive rib cage and lungs and marvel at the huge size of this Leatherback.

The Leatherback has been instrumented to dive lower than 3,000 feet in search of giant jellyfish. This is the only sea turtle that does not have a shell.

As many times I have seen this process, I never fail to get "goose bumps" at the

experience. Eggs laid, sand repacked over the four-foot deep nest, she, with lots of effort, climbs out of the wide and deep hole she made and makes her way back into the sea. When a Leatherback comes to nest, she often returns in the same season to nest between four and five times, which can mean that one Leatherback can lay up to 500 eggs in a season.

Once the Leatherbacks begin to

emerge from the sea, the time can speed by quickly with the intensity of running up and down the beach, filming, watching, etc. So, a glance at a watch surprises most when dawn is near. A Pacific sunrise on a remote beach can be a vision never to forget.

We return to the boat, shower and get cleaned up, have breakfast and return to the beach after sunrise to participate in actual nest research with the Papuan staff. On some trips, the research is also accomplished at night. We examine the nests that have hatched to determine how many eggs hatched and did not. Often, we locate and release babies that are caught deep in the sand and would not live unless brought to the surface.

Helping the species

Our motivation is to stop the extinction spiral. To place more hatchlings into the sea is a prime directive of our foundation. Our staffs have this purpose to accomplish each day and night as they locate and mark egg nests. Our ongoing results this year come from doing exactly that and more (relocating nests from global warming areas of egg destruction). The apparent results of the 2008 nesting data is cause for proclaiming a terrific success.

Success

We are achieving one of our foundation objectives by increasing the numbers of babies put out to the sea to live, to

grow and return to nest at a later time. In one nest at night, expeditioners assisted 16 hatchlings to the surf, which would not have lived without human intervention. During the following morning, nest researchers were able to locate and release more trapped babies. All who participated remain excited. So far, in this season, our staff have located and released over 600 hatchlings from deep in nests (this effort has NOT been accomplished or catalogued previously on these very remote beaches).

Our relocated nests are producing approximately an 85 percent success rate of eggs that hatch, which would have otherwise drowned or cooked deep in the nests. At season close (end October), we anticipate a summary of very encouraging results. Yessss, we ARE excited! Our volunteer science panel of PhD Marine Biologists is reviewing the data for a later release to the public.

At mid-morning, we board the ship and head west into the Raja Ampat Islands to dive out the remaining days of the expedition. We extended the venue of the dives to include Kawe and Waya, both West of the Ampats and on the Equator. Diving in this pristine region is perhaps the last great dive location left. In 2007 and 2008, the majority of dive and travel magazines and *National Geographic* have featured this area because of clear waters and amazing concentrations of marine life.

We continue to offer these expeditions in 2009. A cash deposit of US\$500 is required to reserve a bed before April 30. A few beds remain on both trips, but they will be filled quickly. Information on the 2009 expeditions can be requested by e-mail at: saveourleatherbacks@earthlink.net. If you want a combined experience of a life time, join us. Only about 300 have sat beside this living Jurassic era dinosaur in this very remote location. ■

LEATHERBACK FACTS

- Type: Reptile
- Genus species: *Dermochelys coriacea*
- Primary diet: Jellyfish
- Average life span: 45 years (est.)
- Size: Up to 7 feet (2 meters)
- Weight: Up to 2,000 pounds (900k)
- Fact: The largest leatherback ever found was 8.5 feet-long (2.6 meters) and weighed 2,020 pounds (916k).
- Protection status: Endangered
- Size relative to a 6-ft (2-m) man



Make a difference

Join the adventure and become an active part of the research team. Travel to exotic, seldom seen locations. Depending on when you decided to make the trip, you'll watch rare, nearly extinct, turtles lay eggs or watch the eggs hatch and the babies travel to the ocean.

Dive the legendary Raja Ampat islands aboard a large, comfortable, fully-equipped ship: a classic Indonesian Phinisi design with all the amenities a diver would hope for – and more! The M.V.S. Raja Ampat is the only premier live aboard in Indonesian waters.

The expeditions can accommodate up to 12 divers per trip in six air-conditioned cabins with in-suite toilets and hot showers.

The boat has a very comfortable salon and is fully equipped with camera tables and multiple electric outlets. Healthy buffet meals are served and you will be hosted by excellent, experienced dive guides.

Dive clubs and dive groups.

Reserve a trip for your group and all dive together – 12 people per trip.

- Trip 1 July 14th – July 24th — *sold out*
- Trip 2 July 28 – August 07
- Trip 3 August 11 – August 21

All trips are hosted by Larry McKenna, PhD, SOLO's Founder who has made multiple trips to this area and is very familiar with the beaches, the dive spots, and the locals. He is an accomplished author, photographer, film maker and diver.

Assisting him will be SOLO volunteers who have also been to the beaches.

Best of The best of the best

Larry promises that we will dive the "Best of the very Best" among the islands of Raja Ampat— now including Kawe, straddling the equator!

The cost per person is USD \$2,750* (maximum of 12 people per trip) and includes all boat costs except tips. This is a deep discount by the boat owners who are supporting our cause. A standard trip would cost over \$3,600. International and local airfare is not included. These expedition prices are able through SOLO.

Expedition reservations are secured by a \$500 deposit on or before May 2009. Further details will be sent to those who reserve a space.

Tax exemption for US citizens

*Because you are participating in the work of this 501(c) (3) tax exempt Foundation, all expedition fees, airfare, hotels, and meals are 100% tax deductible.

Leatherback pewter pin - one of the many gift items that can be purchased in SOLO's webshot. All proceeds go to the cause



Meet Indonesia's Youngest Leatherback Turtle Volunteer

Meet Justin Howard. He is an 11th grader at Ipeka International Christian School in west Jakarta, Indonesia's sprawling capital city.

Justin contacted S.O.L.O. over 1 year ago by surfing on his computer and found our Web site. Frequently since then Justin has peppered us with all manner of questions concerning the extinction crisis facing the Leatherbacks. He has attempted to engage class mates in the information sharing and in extolling them to join him in spreading the awareness of the situation here in his own nation. He will succeed as time pushes forward. Justin has the firm support in his activities from a super keen family.

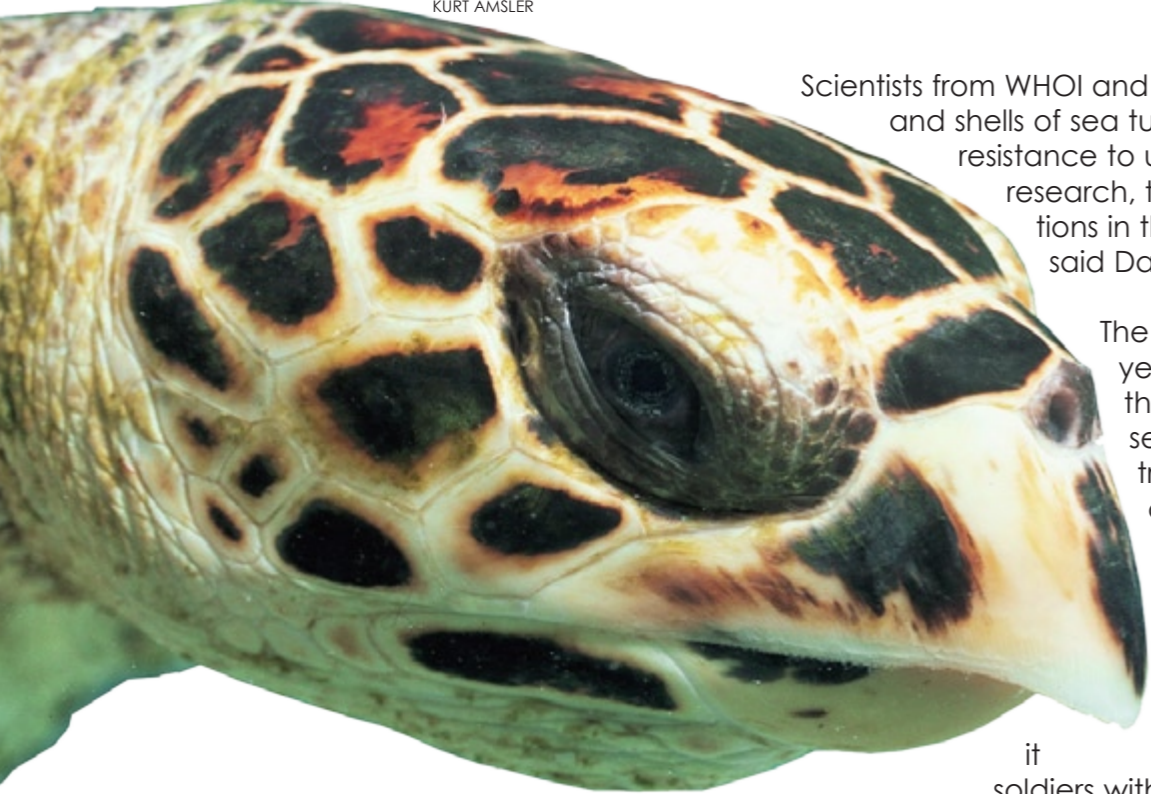
He is 16 and about to begin his senior year of high school. Justin's education in University is to be a Marine Biologist and join in Global efforts to save our oceans. Justin can be e-mailed at: pandaren_73@hotmail.com

Join a 2009 expedition

Join Kurt Amsler

Don't miss out on an unique opportunity to travel with one of the very best underwater photographers on the planet. Kurt Amsler will join the third trip during which he will lead a special "On The Beach with Papuans" visit. Trip will be from August 10 or 12 for 4 days. Experience include a truly unique "Tenting Experience" with the Leatherback Turtles and to walk in virgin jungles. Maximum group size is 8 people





KURT AMSLER

Scientists from WHOI and the U.S. Navy have found out that the skulls and shells of sea turtles have an amazing and unexpected resistance to underwater shock waves. With added research, that resistance could have human applications in the form of improved body armor design, said Darlene Ketten, a WHOI biologist.

The experiment first began more than five years ago in a test pond in Maryland, where the Navy gauged the safety of ship hulls by setting off explosions near test vessels. They tried to clear the area of marine mammals and sea turtles prior to detonation, but needed to determine how far the animals had to be from the blast to remain safe.

The skulls of the turtles include a broad shelf of bone that may reflect shock waves away from the brain. She likened it to the helmets worn by some World War I soldiers with a flange in back.

Ketten said sea turtles resemble and move like "underwater tanks," and she noted the extra protection around the skull might be nature's strategy to compensate for the fact that sea turtles can't contract their head into a shell like land turtles.

Turtle skulls are shock-resistant

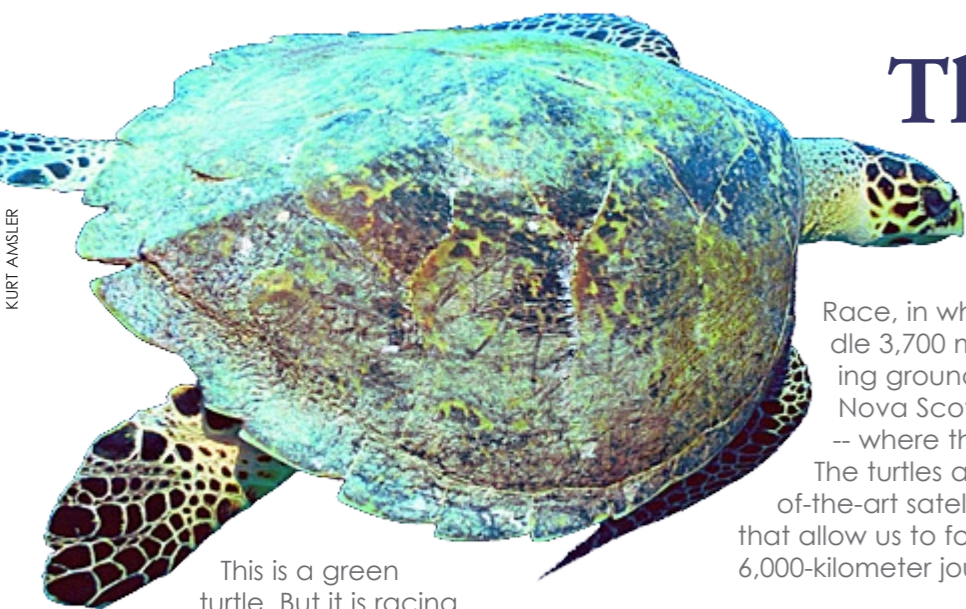
What started out as an experiment to protect sea turtles during underwater explosions may end up saving the lives of soldiers on land, scientists from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) find.



SOURCE: WOODS HOLE OCEANOGRAPHIC INSTITUTION

A three-dimensional reconstruction from CT scans of a Kemp's Ridley turtle

DARLENE KETTEN, WOODS HOLE OCEANOGRAPHIC INSTITUTION COMPUTERIZED SCANNING AND IMAGING FACILITY



KURT AMSLER

This is a green turtle. But it is racing

The Great Turtle Race

Eleven leather-back sea turtles have set out on the Great Turtle Race, in which the turtles paddle 3,700 miles from their feeding grounds off the coast of Nova Scotia to the Caribbean -- where they breed and nest. The turtles are tagged with state-of-the-art satellite tracking devices that allow us to follow their incredible 6,000-kilometer journey.

The data collected from the turtles during the migration will help scientists in their own race to save this endangered species from threats such as coastal development, fishery bycatch, and egg harvesting.

Which turtle will reach the finish line first? Which will dive the deepest or go the farthest afield? Will they all make it to the end? Follow the turtles as they race across the Atlantic on **National Geographic's website**

GET CLOSER

WETPIXEL EXPEDITIONS 2009

BAHAMAS EXPEDITIONS

- Feb 07-14, 2009 Tiger Sharks and Great Hammerheads
- May 05-13, 2009 Oceanic White Tip Sharks
- May 16-24, 2009 Oceanic White Tip Sharks
- Jul 13-20, 2009 Sharks and Dolphins

More information: <http://wetpixel.com/links/bahamas>



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OTHER EXPEDITIONS

- Mar 07-Mar 22, 2009 Sorong, Halmahera, Ambon, Indonesia
- Mar 25-Apr 09, 2009 Ambon and the Banda Sea, Indonesia
- Nov 24-Dec 06, 2009 Eastern Fields, Papua New Guinea
- Dec 08-Dec 19, 2009 Eastern Fields, Papua New Guinea

Contact Wetpixel for details: <http://wetpixel.com/contact>