

S.O.L.O.: Guardians of the Pacific



By John Tapley
Photos courtesy Larry McKenna

During a dive trip in Eastern Indonesia in 2005 with his wife Bonnie, Larry McKenna set out to capture footage of a Pacific leatherback turtle. After reaching a secluded beach via canoe, he encountered one of the majestic, endangered creatures first hand and experienced a spark of inspiration - he wished to see his new friend prosper. Following a rigorous funding campaign, and largely thanks to the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA), Larry's dream came to fruition through a special organization: Save Our Leatherbacks Operation (S.O.L.O.).

Completely fueled by the passion of volunteers and generous donations, S.O.L.O. is a certified IRS 501(c) (3) non-profit charity foundation and a registered Texas environmental non-profit corporation. The organization's three-fold mission agenda is to educate the public about the Pacific leatherback turtle and its plight, join people together in a democratic fashion to illicit change, and reverse the population shift via a series of hands-on initiatives and projects at nesting beaches.

Climate change has had a substantial negative impact on ocean life and the Pacific leatherbacks are no exception. As Pacific temperatures raise and water levels heighten, the reptiles' nesting grounds are barraged by intense heat and overwhelmed by flooding; many nestlings perish before they can properly hatch. According to McKenna, the threat facing Pacific leatherback turtles has far-reaching, though not immediately apparent, consequences to the oceans' food chain. As the turtles

primarily predate on jellyfish, which consume fingerlings, their extinction would cause a massive, irreparable crash in an already fragile environment.

Of special importance are S.O.L.O.'s partnerships with indigenous people residing on various islands in the Pacific. Because S.O.L.O. can only accomplish so much with its allocated visitation time, the hard work and dedication of local associates is vital to maintaining the mission. S.O.L.O. volunteers work closely with native villages and help provide them with the tools, provisions, and education necessary to facilitate change. Banding together with locals, the organization has implemented several enterprises such as daily and nightly beach patrols, construction of protective fencing and scaffolding installations, and crucial data collection processes.

One of S.O.L.O.'s keystone fundraising and groundwork projects, Turtle Discovery Tours, allows participants to get a firsthand experience at the operation's efforts and also provides unforgettable leisurely pursuits. This year's excursion, slated to begin September 6, will take place in the Indonesian provinces of Bali and East Java in an area magnanimously titled "The Island of the Gods". The 11-day tour includes a diverse array of activities and accommodations such as diving, snorkeling, traditional ceremonies, and much more.

For more information on S.O.L.O., its future projects, volunteer opportunities, and further details on September's tour, visit www.saveourleatherbacks.org.