

LOGGER

HEADS

THE LOST YEARS

> I WAS INVITED BY PRODUCERS LARRY ZETLIN AND CHRIS CARROLL TO WORK AS UNDERWATER DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY ON GULLIVER MEDIA'S HIGH-DEFINITION DOCUMENTARY FILM ABOUT MARINE TURTLES.

: ROSS ISAACS



Main: Ross Isaacs using rebreather films Loggerhead turtle feeding on clams at Lady Elliott Island. (Lance Robb)

Inset: Researcher Joanna works with the Peruvian fishing community to show how to collect data and set the Loggerheads free. (Tyrone Canning)

Loggerheads are a threatened species of large sea turtle and though they're found in all oceans, except the Arctic and Antarctic, this doco looks only at 'our' home-grown Queensland loggerheads, which breed mainly in the southern part of Queensland's coast and around a few off-shore islands.

Dr Col Limpus, a world renowned turtle and croc expert from Queensland's Department of Environment and Resource Management (ERM), suggested that the loggerhead story is far more interesting than it first appears. He'd solved the mystery of where Australian loggerheads go after hatching. The film would take us on a journey around the world seeking the answers to this mystery.

The film, directed by legendary natural history director, Jeremy Hogarth, is a 'blue chip' production, being shot on broadcast quality high definition cameras with the underwater team utilizing state of the art closed circuit rebreathers to record rare footage of the turtles.

Filming baby loggerhead turtles is not easy. They quickly disperse at sea and

are rarely if ever seen again until they return to Australian waters as half-grown adults. The only way we were going to film hatchlings swimming was to get them immediately after they hatched. Much of the filming was done at Mon Repos Conservation Park where Dr Col Limpus has been studying loggerhead turtles for over 30 years. Col spends every breeding season at this site outside Bundaberg studying and tagging turtles. Mid-January is the height of the laying activity, and early nests are beginning to hatch. Col supervised much of the filming and as we were close to the beach, the turtles were safely returned after the ERM staff both tagged and measured our small stars. Director- Jeremy Hogarth, Line-Producer- Rebecca McElroy, Camera Assistant- Tyrone Canning and I travelled to South America's west coast to film Australian loggerheads at the very extreme of their trans-Pacific journey.

Aussie loggerheads, after hatching, drift eastwards on the South Equatorial Current towards Chile and Peru feeding and growing as they go. By the time juveniles reach South America, they are seven to 10-years old and have reached a size of 40 centimetres. Unfortunately many



Top L-R: Loggerhead turtle. (Lance Robb)
 Ross Isaacs using closed circuit rebreather & HD camera system. (Lance Robb)
 Fishing boat & film crews enjoy the evening light off Peru. (Tyrone Canning)
 Ross Isaacs films Loggerhead turtle. (Tyrone Canning)

Bottom L-R: Ross Isaacs approaches manta rays. (Lance Robb)
 Ross Isaacs & Lance Robb gear up. (Tyrone Canning)
 The fishing port of Ilo in southern Peru. (Ross Isaacs)
 Filming off the longline fishing boat off Southern Peru. (Tyrone Canning)

'loggers' are caught by local long-liners whilst fishing for target fish species such as Mahi Mahi and tuna.

We needed local information and assistance in Peru, so Col Limpus put us in touch with Joanna Alfaro in Lima; she works with the Peruvian fishing community, monitoring and minimizing bird and turtle by-catch. Rebecca organised for the film crew to meet Joanna in the small fishing village of Port Ilo in the southern Peru, where previously young loggerheads have been caught by the long-liners. Joanna explained that it would be best to come during the Mahi Mahi season, which commences early February.

Filming in Peru had its problems, such as getting the camera gear into and out of

the country; the cost of excess baggage; availability of scuba tanks and diving gear for the underwater shoot (there are only two scuba diving centres in the whole of Peru); and, most importantly, organising the fishing boat the film crew would join to go to sea to film. The boat was a small (8 metre), old and decrepit wooden vessel. It had no galley, no toilets, no bunks or beds! When the crew asked where the toilet was 'El Capitan' casually pointed overboard!

There were no alternative boats in port and certainly none that were fishing and prepared to take a foreign film crew; for that a permit was required, which could take days or weeks and only available in Lima. The other problem was that, without a permit, the crew could not legally even sit on the boat. The captain had an idea.

During the day the crew casually visited the boat and stowed a few small personal items and food. The guard at the gate was 'persuaded' to look the other way while this transaction took place. The heavy professional gear would have to wait until nightfall before it could be stowed!

As luck would have it after searching a large area off the coast and illegally crossing into Chilean waters, we got to film a juvenile loggerhead, which was caught on the long line at the last moment. Joanna took her DNA samples and measurements and the teenage turtle was released with great joy by the crew, with our mission now completed.

At the same time the crew was filming in Peru, specialist close-up and 'table-top'

DOP Peter Nearhos, with assistant cameraperson Sarah Scragg, spent two weeks filming hatching turtles at Mon Repos Nature Conservation Park. Peter overcame the problem of how to film hatching turtles, which happens almost a metre under the sand, by installing a special Perspex wall to the depth of the eggs, with progressive holes drilled to allow a probe lens through to record the private first moments of the infants. Super-close work of 'egg pipping' as the hatchlings slowly emerged was achieved by using a Perspex incubator, which allowed a more controlled filming environment for lighting and camera angles.

After arriving back in Australia the underwater team's task was to attempt to film some rarely seen underwater loggerheads behaviour. We set up on Lady Elliott Island, a hotspot for these turtles. My dive crew used state-of-the-art closed circuit rebreather equipment, allowing us to film much closer to sound sensitive animals such as turtles and manta rays. No one else in Australia is using this equipment for natural history filming.

computer-controlled breathing apparatus allowing a diver to stay down for between 4-10 hours in stealth mode. My rebreather is a APDiving, Evolution CCR which has a four hour down time and my safety diver has an Innerspace Systems Corp, Megalodon CCR with a down time of up to 10 hours with the right configuration.

Usually diver's bubbles scare creatures like manta ray away, but we had them hover over our heads for 40 minutes. We were able to stay with individual loggerheads for up to three hours. After a time the animals just ignored the divers and we were able to film close up feeding and other rarely seen behaviour contributing to our understanding of these animals.

Loggerheads - The Lost Years will be seen on the ABC here in Australia, National Geographic Channels US and distributed by National Geographic Television International for worldwide release later in 2010.



This highly technical diving uses extremely sophisticated,