

: JASON ISLEY/SCUBAZOO

# IN SEARCH OF THE RAREST REPTILE

For the past decade Scubazoo have been on a mission to film these turtles in their natural habitats, something that hasn't been done previously. This quest has led them to remote locations across the globe and resulted in some very hard-earned and unique footage. In 2000 Simon Christopher first raised the idea of making a film about leatherback turtles and their

Birds' Head Peninsula off the north coast of West Papua in Indonesia to lay their eggs. This spectacularly wild frontier location is unfortunately hosts a number of active timber logging settlements, which are gradually destroying this and the surrounding area.

Intense thunderstorms prevented any successful encounters during the first

their first encounter with a leatherback, but after several nights there were still no signs of nesting females.

The local dance troupe gave a performance of their leatherback turtle conservation production - the troupe tours the entire Huon coastline, using a combination of song, dance and music to illustrate the story of the leatherback and

impending demise whilst we still had the chance. Considering they're the most widespread of all sea turtles, there's very little in the way of images as they're rarely encountered by divers. The most common encounters between humans and leatherbacks are when they come ashore to lay their eggs. So the first trip led Simon, a video camera, some tape stock and very little else, to the remote location of Sorong in Irian Jaya.

Every year, these enormous prehistoric-looking turtles visit the beaches of the

week, but when finally one did occur, it was a spectacular experience from start to finish and well worth the wait. Simon filmed as much of the nesting process as possible without disturbing the 350kg 6ft long leatherback. Simon continued to film as she lumbered down to the sea. Once in the water, the turtle transformed from a heavy cumbersome creature into a graceful creature of the sea.

Simon says: "sitting on the sea floor at about 3am in the middle of nowhere, I was struck by the sheer beauty and grace of such an enormous creature as she glided above my head, heading back out to sea, capturing a few seconds of this on film forever."

The Huon Coastline Leatherback Conservation Project based on the eastern shores of Papua New Guinea, is one organization helping with the coastline problems. In February 2006 Scubazoo were invited to document their efforts to preserve one of the last breeding populations in the Pacific region. Simon Enderby and Matt Oldfield flew over for

to highlight its importance to the local communities, and the rest of the world - a memorable start to what turned out to be a memorable evening.

The camera team left the village guest house and yet again took up station on the nesting beach, patrolling the many kilometres of beach whilst trying in vain to evade the marauding masses of mosquitoes. At 2am on Valentines Day morning, Simon and Matt were alerted by one of the rangers - a female had just been spotted heading up the beach a kilometre from the camp.

Over the next four days and nights the team slept little, concentrating on documenting the local village life, translating interviews with the village heads about their views on the leatherback and its conservation, and returning to the beaches each night in the hope of capturing footage of more females as they beached to lay their eggs. Both trips were a huge success in achieving topside footage of nesting behaviour and hatchlings, however the

*Above: A turtle hunter with harpoons ready spends hours at sea scanning the horizon for leatherbacks resting on the surface.*

*Below left: Most of the time turtles will escape by diving to greater depths.*

*Bottom right: But if a turtle is harpooned, the hunters then enter the water to secure it with extra rope.*



> THE HEAVY-WEIGHT CHAMPION OF THE WORLD AMONGST TURTLES, THE LEATHERBACK (*DERMOCHELYS CORIACEA*) IS THE LARGEST AND MOST WIDELY DISTRIBUTED TURTLE IN THE WORLD. THEY ARE 100 MILLION YEARS OLD AND HAVE OUTLIVED THE DINOSAURS, BUT ARE NOW DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO EXTINCTION. LIKE ALL MARINE TURTLES THEY ARE ON THE CITES LIST OF ENDANGERED SPECIES, AND THERE ARE NOW MANY CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN PLACE TO RESCUE THE DWINDLING NUMBERS STILL AROUND... BUT IS IT ALL TOO LATE?



L E A T H E R B A C K S

Right and far right: Scubazoo cameraman Chris Tan films a leatherback turtle shortly before it is pulled to the surface where it's quickly put out of its misery and suffering.



shots of leatherbacks in open water swimming, feeding and mating eluded them.

In November 2007, reports of sightings of feeding leatherbacks in remote Indonesia led me to Kei, where I'd finally gather the remaining shots we needed. Nick Pilcher, good friend and turtle expert, joined me

**"THEN OUT OF THE GLOOM, HER PREHISTORIC, TIMELESS FORM APPEARED, SHE WAS DEVOID OF ANY EMOTION. SHE SURFACED JUST IN FRONT OF ME FOR ONE LAST BREATH OF AIR AND TRUNDLED OVER ME LIKE A STEAM RAIN. SO UNGAINLY AND CLUMSY ON LAND, THIS WAS A DIFFERENT ANIMAL! HER HUGE FRONT FLIPPERS GAVE ENORMOUS POWER AND DESPITE MY FRANTIC TURBO FINS, SHE FADED OUT OF MY VIEW FINDER WITHIN SECONDS. I WAS STUNNED! I SURFACED, SPAT OUT MY REG AND SHOUTED OUT LOUD FOR JOY".**  
Simon Christopher

to see what success WWF were having in protecting the leatherbacks visiting that area.

The trip to the WWF lodge on Kei is a story in itself – let's just say it included a

missed flight, a malaria relapse and a serious lack of flights from Ambon to Kei for two days. We finally arrived at the lodge but my time there had already been greatly reduced, so I had to get out to sea as soon as possible.

Our first day was disappointing due to bad weather - spotting turtles on the surface was difficult, even for our guides. We saw a few heads above the waves but didn't get very close, and returned to base slightly disappointed. The next day conditions had improved; in the first hour we'd already seen a few turtles on the surface, but just couldn't get close enough to them.

Finally, we had our chance. We approached it from behind and when we were about 75 metres away I slowly slipped into the water and, video camera in hand, finned quietly towards it. The voice in my head urged me to swim hard before it could disappear into the depths, but I knew I had to approach with caution. But it didn't instantly disappear. I dived just before it did and managed to film it as it

passed towards deeper water. This time, it turned and headed back to the surface. I kept the camera rolling and filmed it as it dived over and over to about 20 metres and back to the surface. At one point, it appeared to get a little agitated by my presence and swam directly at me in a very aggressive manner. After 30 minutes I decided to switch to the stills camera and swam to the boat. Whilst changing my equipment, I thought I may lose this turtle, but when I swam back it was continuing its ducking and diving. This was amazing – I was up close and very personal with one of the rarest creatures on our planet! I got plenty of images before it finally headed for deeper water.

We had a few more encounters with another leatherback before heading to Ohoidertutu, a nearby village known to hunt leatherbacks. As we arrived we came across one hunting boat. They'd failed to catch any turtles, but another boat had returned with a small green turtle; a new toy for the small children of the village.

We spoke in depth with the WWF crew stationed there and it became obvious they were up against a huge task because the local villagers had traditionally hunted the leatherbacks for years. The team's biggest problem was that they didn't have accurate numbers of either visiting turtles or the amount killed by the villagers each year so the impact of the hunting on visiting or global numbers was unknown.

Their other projects included community outreach, education and capacity building through workshops and community consultations, plus livelihood support and training activities. This would all take time as one of the elderly hunters

Top left: To our amazement, the hunters then deliberately sink their boat to enable them to maneuver the huge turtle into the hull.

Top right: They then have to hold the boat upright whilst bailing the water out to refloat it.

Centre: The turtle is then immediately taken to a beach close by and slaughtered. The meat is then divided between the hunters taking part in the hunt.

Bottom: The potential for photographing and filming leatherbacks underwater is very good in Kei, especially if you're a good freediver or trained on rebreathers.

**A BETTER OPTION?**  
Observing leatherback turtles in the wild is extremely difficult and the Scubazoo team's fantastic experiences could provide a great drawcard to divers. If carefully established and well managed, these leatherbacks could bring the villagers of Kei a useful long term income from turtle watching, as opposed to hunting them for food. The people of Kei don't yet know that they'll eventually remove them from the village food chain and have nothing else to replace them.



**LEATHERBACK TURTLE DISTRIBUTION**  
Yellow = minor nesting locations. Red = known major nesting sites.





Top: During the two week trip in 2008 we also came across a baitball being hunted by bonito and barracuda. Here Chris is almost engulfed by the ball of fish seeking protection.

Above: The reason for the presence of leatherbacks in Kei is purely to feed on the jellyfish found here in huge numbers.

### WHY THE LEATHERBACK IS SO SPECIAL

*Dermochelys Coricea* means 'leathery skin turtle', but like other sea turtles their carapace is actually very hard below the tough outer skin. The fastest growing and heaviest reptile in nature, they weigh up to a ton, and are the fastest swimming of all turtles. They're the most similar to birds and mammals of all the world's reptiles; they have the two classic adaptations for retaining body heat – an insulating layer of fat and a countercurrent heat exchanger.

Leatherbacks can travel thousands of kilometres underwater between mating areas and feeding grounds. It's believed they detect the earth's magnetic field and develop a 'map sense' of where they are, enabling them to travel long distances for food and still return to the

same nesting beach. And why have their numbers diminished so fast? Coastal development, marine pollution and fishing impacts, such as longlines and driftnets, take hundreds of leatherbacks annually. Even if the female leatherback manages to find the beach and successfully lay her eggs, they're likely to be poached for human consumption, or in some areas dug up by feral dogs or pigs. If they survive this and hatch, the hatchlings face many predators before they reach the sea and even more once they start their ocean life.

The leatherbacks' sole diet is jellyfish, therefore they're prone to a long slow death from ingesting plastic bags. Mistakenly swallowed because they resemble jellyfish, the plastic lodges in the leatherback's throat and chokes them.

explained to me, "Our local belief is that our ancestors require us to hunt for their ritual ceremonies and also for daily food, as there isn't enough to feed all the families". He then stated "trading of leatherback meat is considered violation to our customary (adat) rules".

Our continued interest in the rapidly diminishing leatherback population meant we were still unsatisfied with the material we had and what was being done – we needed to both film and find out more. Fellow Scubazoo cameraman Chris Tan and I returned to Ohoidertu for a two-week shoot in November 2008 to gather both stills and footage of leatherbacks feeding on jellyfish.

This time jellyfish feeding wasn't occurring on the surface, it was much deeper. Most jellyfish swarms we found were at about 10 metres and showed evidence of turtle feeding. At this point it appeared feeding images weren't going to be as easy as originally anticipated. It was also very difficult to get close to any turtles on the surface. Behavioural patterns seemed to have changed drastically since our 2007 encounters, and we attributed this to the number of hunting boats gathered in the area each day. We did however, come across successful hunts and witnessed gruesome scenes of leatherbacks being slaughtered. Documenting these wasn't easy and trying not to interfere and stop

the hunters took more self-control than I thought I possessed.

During the last couple of days we had a few good encounters, and even came across a baitball of fish being hunted by bonito and giant barracuda. We considered extending our stay, as we still weren't happy with the encounters we'd had on what may be one of our last chances to see these magnificent beasts in the wild. Instead we decided to set a return date in 2009. WWF were planning to build a lodge in Ohoidertutu to house guests, making it a more accessible experience.

It's now known from tagging nesting leatherbacks in Sorong that some of those turtles head down to the feeding grounds of Kei, making these individuals extremely important to the global population. WWF have a huge job convincing the villagers to stop the hunting – not only is it tradition, but they also need the food. Hopefully more people will start to visit the area to see the turtles and the villagers can be hired to hunt the leatherbacks for people to see them rather than to eat them. This, it seems, is the only way to protect the turtles visiting this particular area. If not, then the hunting in Kei will continue and will certainly hasten the demise of these dinosaurs of the seas over the next few years.

> LINKS [www.wwf.org.au](http://www.wwf.org.au) [www.leatherback.org](http://www.leatherback.org) [www.scubazoo.com](http://www.scubazoo.com) [www.conservation.org](http://www.conservation.org) [www.mcsuk.org](http://www.mcsuk.org)  
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