

Build a School, Save a Reef

One village, one non-governmental organisation(NGO), and one dive boat team up to save the eighth wonder of the world By Duane Silverstein

STANDING ON the deck of the *Bilikiki*, it's easy to see why novelist James Michener heralded Marovo Lagoon as the eighth wonder of the world. Located on the eastern portion of New Georgia Island in the Solomon Islands, Marovo is the world's largest island-enclosed lagoon. But it wasn't as much its size as its beauty that impressed Michener. The lush mangroves and rainforests, the brilliantly coloured birds, and the sunsets reminiscent of Hollywood are truly striking.

The vistas below the water are even more impressive, making Marovo Lagoon a highly sought-after dive destination. Beautiful hard corals, huge sea fans, free swimming sea snakes, large schools of barracuda, a one-and-a-half-metre giant clam, sharks and some ornate ghost pipefish were among the marine life entered into my logbook on a typical day. But there's trouble in paradise.

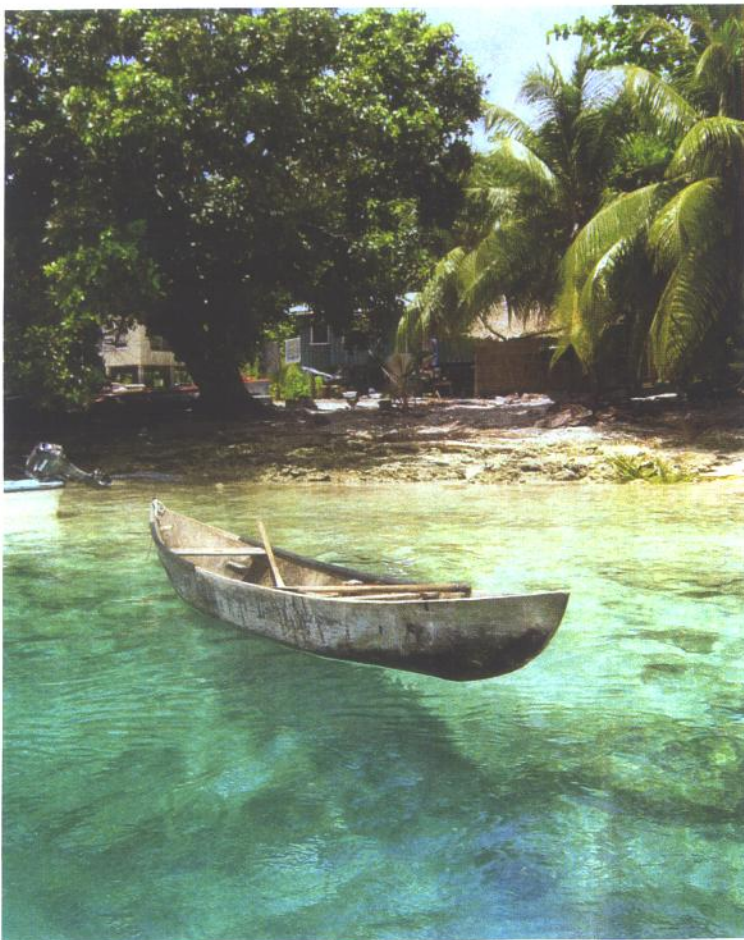
The Solomon Islands, located southeast of PNG in the South Pacific, are equally renowned for their tropical forests. Lumber companies are rapidly buying logging rights from the local villagers who own the forests. The timber rights are often sold for relatively small amounts of money, which seem a fortune to villages on a subsistence non-cash economy. When the trees are cut, though, massive erosion and silting follow. The soil then enters the ocean, blocking needed sunlight from reaching the reefs, disturbing the delicate balance of nutrients the fragile coral reefs depend on to survive. It's a vicious cycle in which everyone loses.

Grassroots Battle

Mbili is a typical village in the Solomon Islands. Located in Marovo Lagoon, it is home to 200 inhabitants, all of whom are descendants of the last recorded victim of a head-hunting party in the Solomons. In addition to subsistence farming, the people of Mbili are among the most skilled wood carvers in the Solomons. They sell their carvings to the passengers on the *Bilikiki*, which stops in the village once every two weeks.

The one-room school in Mbili is in very poor condition. It's also too small to accommodate any students above the sixth-grade level. For many years, the people of Mbili have worked to build a new school that will have a second story to serve as a community centre. With their subsistence economy, this has proven to be impossible.

Enter Seacology, which offered to underwrite the expense for constructing a new school and community centre, in exchange for an agreement from Mbili Village to preserve a 12-acre, uninhabited island from logging; and to ban fishing in a nine-acre marine protected area.



A canoe floats in front of Mbili village, Solomon Islands

Jonathan Lee

1. Thousands of jacks darken the skies at Barracuda Point, Mary Island

2. Girls from Mbili bring leis for the Seacology group

3. A Mbili child



In late 2005, a delegation of Seacology board members and donors boarded the *Bilikiki* to visit Mbili, and see firsthand how the project was progressing. En route to Mbili, the diving exceeded all expectations. The water was warm, and the visibility in most dive sites exceeded 50m. In fact, it was so clear that the divers were required to check the depth gauges frequently, as the clarity made it hard to accurately judge the depth.

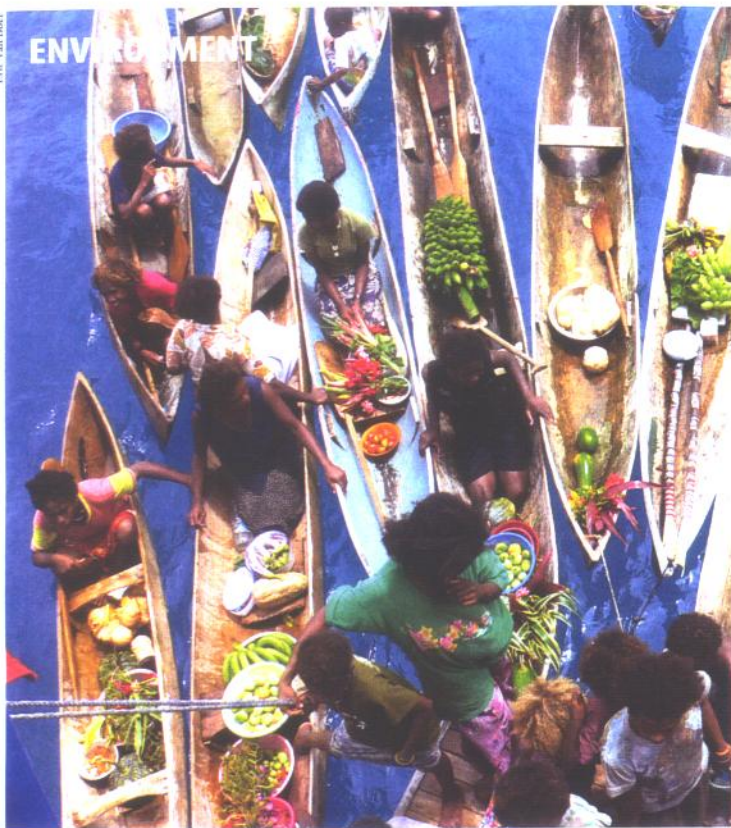
And there was a lot to see. Barracuda Point, off Mary Island, ranks as one of the world's most spectacular dive sites. We dropped in on a spiralling school of over 1,000 large chevron barracuda, indifferent to our presence. We took turns being enveloped by massive schools of jacks, which treated us as if we were one of the gang.

Upon arrival in Mbili, the young men of the village performed a ceremonial spear dance greeting. The chiefs of the village, Rae Boe, and his brother, Lutén Watts, took us on a tour of the existing school and let us know how important the new school and community centre is to the village. We were draped with leis, serenaded with an original song about the new school, and served a traditional feast. Seacology board member Don Arntz commented, "I never cease to be amazed at the incredible hospitality displayed by island villagers, whenever I visit a Seacology project site. We are always treated like we are part of the family, and by the time we depart we feel like we are."

Lutén Watts gave a speech thanking Seacology on behalf of the village. He was very nervous; his hands shook as he read



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The Mbili floating market surrounds the Bilikiki



The Seacology group was greeted at Mbili with a traditional spear dance

from his notes, but his delivery was from the heart, and he moved the delegation to tears. Seacology board member Graham Farrar responded for our group when he said, "It is us who should be thanking the people of Mbili for your wisdom in deciding to preserve your forests and coral reefs for future generations." We were then presented with some of the beautiful woodcarvings for which Mbili is famous.

Moments later, we visited the school construction site. The villagers explained that all construction is taking place without a single machine. The supplies must be shipped from the capital, Honiara, in a small open boat in rough seas, a voyage that typically takes 11 hours. Then all the water, gravel and cement must be carried by hand from the beach 100m away. Despite these difficult conditions, the foundation has been laid and work has been completed up to the window level of the first story. It is anticipated the school will be complete some time in 2006. Divers who travel on the *Bilikiki* may visit the school and the new marine reserve.

Michelle Gaut, co-manager of the *Bilikiki*, and the person in charge of monitoring the progress of the school and the enforcement of the marine protected area, said the project is "a great step done exactly the right way. This project can serve as a model for other villages throughout the Solomon Islands."

As for me, I returned to the airport to catch flights to visit Seacology projects in other remote island villages in Fiji and the Maldives. The airline food and poor in-flight movies aside, I felt very fortunate. Most people are lucky if they have a 'once in a lifetime' experience once in a lifetime. Because of Seacology, I have a once in a lifetime experience every few months. **SD**

LIVE AND LEARN

Seacology (www.seacology.org) is a NGO whose sole purpose is preserving marine and terrestrial island environments across the globe. Seacology focuses on win-win projects where islanders receive a critically needed benefit they request, such as fresh water wells or a medical clinic, in return for making an important compromise on behalf of the environment. To date, Seacology has helped preserve over 1.7 million acres of coral reef and other marine habitats, and an additional 68,000 acres of island forest habitat. In the course of doing this, it has established 76 schools, community centres, and other critically needed facilities in these remote island villages.

As Seacology's office is in the United States, getting to our project sites isn't 'half the fun.' Participants endure long flights, endless waits at airports, transferring to ever-smaller planes only to transfer to even smaller boats does not always make for an enjoyable travel experience. But the rewards of seeing firsthand the positive impact of projects – both in terms of preserving the environment and improving the quality of life of island villagers – make it all worthwhile.

The work is extremely rewarding – not everyone can go to work knowing he'll be doing something that day to help preserve the environment, save a threatened culture or improve the quality of life for people on developing islands. Seacology has projects currently underway in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, China's Hainan Island, Indonesia's North Sulawesi, the Maldives' Kendhoo Island, and PNG's Sariba Island.