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A School for Turtle Eggs

DUANE SILVERSTEIN

THE Maldives is comprised of 1,200 small low-lying coral islands in 24 atolls in the Indian Ocean, located 600 kilometers southwest of Sri Lanka. The enchanting beauty of these atolls, find the Maldives featured often on travel calendars and posters, justifiably claiming to be one of the world's most beautiful nations. However this breathtaking beauty comes at a cost. The highest point on this entire nation is only 3 meters above sea level, putting the Maldives at risk to submergence by rising waters caused by global warming. The devastating tsunami of December 2004, offered an ominous glimpse of the Maldives' future.

Under the gradually rising sea level lies some of the earth's most prolific marine life. Lush hard and soft corals, manta rays, whale sharks and enormous schools of fish are signatures of the atolls. The Maldives is the fish pond of the Indian Ocean. Turtles were once also prolific but sadly threatened recently by consumption for both meat and eggs. In response to the diminishing number of turtles, the Maldivian government had the foresight to enact a law prohibiting the harvesting of turtles. Unfortunately the law had a major loophole – it did not prohibit the harvesting of sea turtle eggs.

In line with Seacology's goal of offering local stake holders tangible benefits, such as a school, community center or fresh water delivery system, in exchange for an agreement to preserve threatened marine or forest ecosystems, we moved in with a bid to preserve the turtle population in the Maldives. Partnering with the Four Seasons Maldives, Seacology approached the village of Kendhoo to explore the possible tangible benefits. In reciprocation to the protection of the sea turtles' nesting grounds and the banning of sea turtle eggs harvesting, the village requested a brand new school. Seacology gladly obliged.

The Seacology delegation attended the formal dedication ceremony for the new school. It was a mutually fulfilling experience that was so aptly and radiantly expressed in the greeting smiles of the children and their joyous celebrations replete with music, dance and colourful flowers and pom-poms. Although the Seacology delegation was honored with their VIP treatment, we are very mindful that the true heroes of the moment are





the islanders, who saw further than the traditional practices they were sacrificing for the long term common good for both turtles and human kind.

Observers have reported that the sea turtle nesting grounds are now undisturbed and an increase in sea turtle eggs. And, of course, Kendhoo has a new school which has incorporated sea turtle preservation into its curriculum. Seacology has since launched projects on two other Maldivian islands in exchange for agreements to ban shark finning and coral and sand mining. The Maldivians positive response assures us the success of these win-win projects, as we continue to celebrate the sea in the Maldives.



Duane Silverstein is the executive director of Seacology.

Seacology is the world's premier non-governmental organization with the sole purpose of preserving the ecosystems and cultures of islands throughout the globe.

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