

“A Public Bathroom, a Solar powered Radio station and a new Walkway for the **Four Kings**”

Preserving Raja Ampat

by DUANE SILVERSTEIN

THE Raja Ampat archipelago comprises of 1,500 islands off the coast of West Papua, Indonesia. Until a few years ago this remote part of the world received very few visitors. This changed when a team of the world's most significant marine scientists dubbed Raja Ampat as the world's bull's-eye of marine biodiversity. With over 1,000 species of fish and 540 species of hard corals, Raja Ampat is now regarded the newest and greatest premier dive destinations.

The diving is marvelously spectacular. During my first dive I was enveloped in a school of huge barracuda surrounded by hundreds of tunas and escorted by huge bumphead parrotfish (*Bolbometopon muricatum*). But one thing you will rarely see in Raja Ampat is reef sharks. The practice of shark finning has decimated the shark population in the region. And this is but one of many threats to the marine life of Raja Ampat.

Waigeo Island is one of the four major islands group giving this region its name of Four Kings – or Raja Ampat in Bahasa Indonesia. Located within the 123,553-acre Bay of Mayalibit, are nine villages.

In line with Seacology's goal of offering local stake holders tangible benefits in exchange for an agreement to preserve threatened marine or forest ecosystems, we approached all nine villages and asked them what they would like in exchange for keeping commercial fishing out of Mayalibit Bay. Each of the nine villages requested something different. One wanted a solar powered radio system, another wanted to build walkways throughout the village, and another wanted public washroom facilities, etc. This is exactly what Seacology provided. In return all nine villages agreed to ban commercial fishing from Mayalibit Bay.

A Seacology delegation visited the area recently to see how the agreement was holding up. Mayalibit Bay is only open to the sea by a lengthy narrow channel surrounded by breathtakingly beautiful mountains. Sailing through on a specially chartered vessel *Seven Seas* run by Dr Jos Pet, the entire Seacology delegation was stunned by the overwhelming beauty of this fjord. We were tempted to jump in for a dive and enjoy this natural splendour. However, even on the surface we could see the water boiling as





the flow squeezed through a long narrow passage. We were told that the last person to dive in this fjord was smashed against the cliffs and broke an arm. On second thought we decided to enjoy the vista from aboard the ship.

We arrived at the village of Waifoï for a celebration in honor of our projects, greeted by drummers forming two rows through which we walked, escorted by the locals. The drummers then followed us all the way to the heart of the village where we were greeted by a men's group singing traditional songs. We were garlanded with leis made from the vines of an insect eating pitcher plant. Chief Silas Louw of neighboring Kabilol Village spoke on behalf of the chiefs of all the nine villages, "We thank Seacology for providing exactly the types of projects we asked for and need the most. We are particularly happy that these projects are tied to the protection of our bay which is instrumental to our future." We are delighted for the opportunities to contribute and responded by thanking the villagers not only for their great hospitality but for their wisdom in protecting the bay for future generations. Simple



yet effective projects like these give hope to the preservation of the amazing marine biodiversity of Raja Ampat, for us and our children to enjoy. ○

* **OCEAN GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY** is supporting the preservation of Raja Ampat with ongoing visual assessment of the marine environment and specie index of the region.