

SEACOLOGY: ENVIRONMENTAL RESCUE FROM ISLAND TO ISLAND

Created in 1991, Seacology is an American NGO whose aim is to save the world's insular ecosystems. Arnaz Mehta, an Indonesia representative for this Berkeley, California-created foundation, takes us on a guided tour of three projects being conducted in the archipelago. She shares her thoughts on this organization's practical approach- "American style" ...

For each case, we always offer a win-win agreement with the villagers", explains in a calm voice Canadian-born Arnaz Mehta, as she contemplates the surroundings from the terrace of the Canggu Club. Equipped with marketing lingo and effective communication, Seacology doesn't seek to burden itself with cumbersome red tape, not in its operation, nor in its way of managing its operations in the field. "We dispatch as little people as possible. We generally call upon on-the-spot volunteers", continues Arnaz Mehta. The personnel based out of the Californian headquarters can be counted on one hand. And there are just nine of them scattered all over the world. They discover, organize, then manage these projects aimed at preserving coral reefs or rain forests. The creation of Seacology - whose name erroneously reflects the variety of its missions, since they are equally as terrestrial as they are aquatic - is based on the knowledge that although it is ranked one of the world's most biodiverse region, it is also the zone most fraught with wildlife destruction. With projects currently in progress on 95 islands in 42 countries, Seacology's small team intends to wage the war against this inconvenient yet documented truth.

There are 44 projects in Indonesia and 17 are currently underway", explains Arnaz Mehta who, along with her American biologist husband Mark Erdmann, was at the origins of the discovery of the coelacanth in the Celebes in 1998. It's not easy acquiring information on the new projects... "We must carefully select the sites and the villages of concern before making them public", she



explains. The funds are donated by very rich benefactors whether they are Seacology members or not, and these are primarily Americans or Japanese. The "win-win" agreements made with the villagers last a minimum of 5 years and a maximum of "for ever". In true fact, these negotiations often resemble real corporate settlements before they are approved, and Arnaz Mehta recognizes that her business degree is of "great use" in her dealings at Seacology.



In June of 2007 at Rajah Ampat, this scattering of islands in the West of Papua, Arnaz Mehta launched a rescue assignment at Mayalibit bay on the island of Waigeo. This unique site of beauty enveloped in mangroves is the cradle of a multitude of species and conceals in its exquisiteness a little known species of white dolphins. Populated by the Mayan people divided into nine very poor villages, the island of Waigeo

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will soon be classified as a "marine wildlife reserve" thanks to the efforts of Conservation International (see *La Gazette de Bali* - issue n° 27 - August 2007). In the mean time, it is now illegal to fish within the boundaries of the 50,000 hectares of bay line.

In exchange, the villagers which account for approximately 1,000 inhabitants, were granted paved paths to reach their fresh water wells and schools. They were provided with solar-powered electrical sources, radio-transmitters and non polluting waste management. The contract runs for ten years minimum.

In Bali, on the slopes of Batukaru, at an altitude of 670 meters lays the village of Sarinbuana, population 860. Its inhabitants decided to become the guardians of a 131-hectar forest sanctuary. "In return, explains Arnaz Mehta, Seacology built large bale and a path which leads to the temples. We also delivered computers to the village school and more recently, we provided the village with gamelan instruments for the children". These farmers, who traditionally grow cocoa, have devoted themselves to refrain from hunting in the forest, and instead will protect it from senseless destruction. But the clauses remain flexible. The villagers have been given an allowance



from the contract regarding the areas surrounding their temples (approximately 1 hectare) should they ever need to expand them in the future. Today, Arnaz Mehta hopes that another agreement with a nearby village will allow for a larger protected zone.

In another instance, waste water flowing from the Tirtagganga Water Palace. This older venture, launched in 2002, demon-

strates how the American NGO takes interest in all aspects of island life as well as its residents. Built in 1948 by the last King of Karangasem, this palace of innumerable basins is visited by hordes of tourists each year. Unfortunately, its public toilets once emptied themselves directly into the palace's immense system of canals, reservoirs and underground springs. The horrid sewer drains have since been replaced by a smart system of drains and water filters known as the "wastewater garden" that "organically breaks down wastewater and produces a rich

habitat for vegetation" as described on the NGO's Internet website.

In a world turned to liberalism, practical solutions like these from the United States therefore seem in perfect adequacy with reality. This is a step which in the end is very similar to Indonesia's proposal laid forth at the last climate conference in Bali (see *La Gazette de Bali* - issue n° 32 - January 2008) which demanded financial compensation in exchange for the protection of its forests. "We are the first organization in the world to make this kind of deal on islands", continues Arnaz Mehta who is also the author of guidebooks on Indonesian wildlife. "We want to make it simple because we often deal with simple people. Most of the time, our agreements are finalized under the protection of the local custom", she states. And financially, how much does it cost? "The Tirtagganga and Sarinbuana projects cost less than USD\$20,000 each. The large majority of our projects are under USD\$ 30,000 and USD\$40,000 is the maximum", she specifies. With a third of Seacology's total projects, the world's largest archipelago is naturally its focus point for its activities. Bali, Papua, Moluku and Sumba to name a few, Indonesia has much to keep an NGO like Seacology busy, and so do the many islands with exotic names noted on Arnaz Mehta's 2008 calendar. But sssh! She won't divulge anything yet, since the secret negotiations are still underway..



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On the Internet
www.seacology.org