

San Francisco Chronicle

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SUNDAY, AUGUST 4, 2002

415-777-1111

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San Francisco Chronicle A3

ECOLOGY *Saving Species of World's Islands*

Berkeley group preserves island treasures

Native peoples
get benefits
for protecting
environment

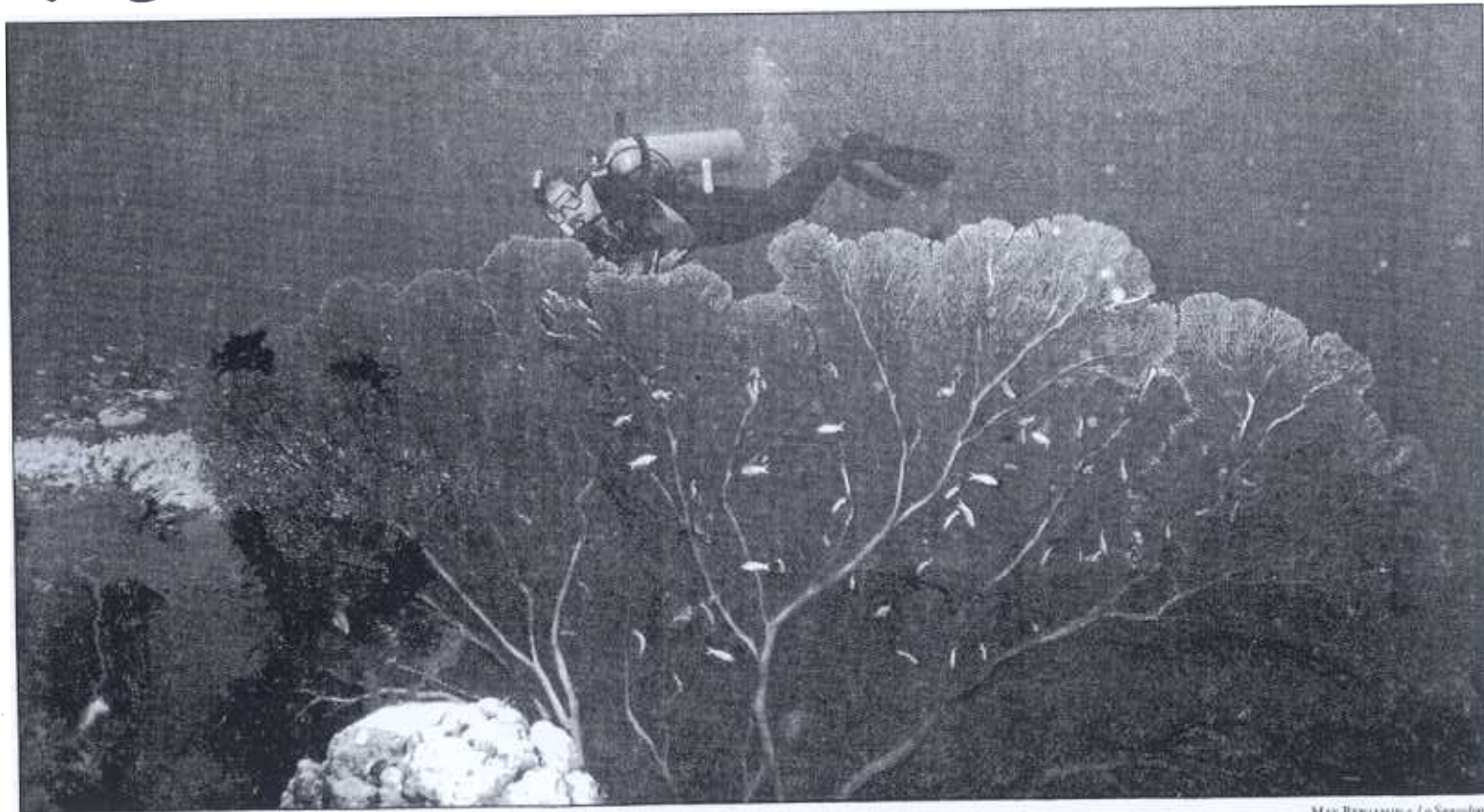
By Jane Kay

CHRONICLE ENVIRONMENT WRITER

Four months ago in the remote Yasawa Islands in Fiji, a Saudi Arabian buyer eager to build a hotel offered \$700,000 for a 40-acre, forest-encrusted islet.

Local villagers weren't eager to sell, but that amount of money is a fortune to them. The money was a way to finally get a community center the village had dreamed of for years.

That's when Seacology, an international environmental group based in Berkeley, stepped in with an unusual offer that the 800 villagers didn't pass up: Leave the island, as well as a neighboring isle, undeveloped for 20 years and create a fishing reserve around them for 10 years, and Seacology would build the community center for free.



MAX BENJAMIN / O Seacology

In a pristine marine reserve that Seacology helped to establish in Papua New Guinea, Duane Silverstein, the group's executive director, floats above a giant sea fan.

(over ->)

"It's so beautiful," said Duane Silverstein, Seacology's executive director. "A picture-perfect beach. The best tourist kind of weather. The perfect place to build a crummy hotel."

"Instead of an environmentally destructive hotel, this pristine beach and coral reef will be around for generations yet to come."

It was just the kind of innovative deal that Seacology was created to make.

Founded in 1993, it is the only environmental organization devoted entirely to helping island people save the native plants and animals that they depend on for their survival.

That's a big order in a world where many species of island flora and fauna, under increasing pressure from development, are facing extinction.

Seacology's effort in the Fiji Islands was just its latest attempt to help islands and their inhabitants:

► Seacology has helped two tribes buy a 25-foot boat for the remote Navatu Village that has rights to one of the largest fishing areas on Fiji's second-largest island, Vanua Levu. In return, the 160 residents have agreed to stop catching fish and sea cucumbers for a decade in nearly 6 square miles of a coral reef ecosystem, home to the biggest nesting area in Fiji for the critically endan-

gered hawksbill turtle. The people have the boat that they wanted, and they can also use it to patrol the new sanctuary.

► On Sulawesi, the Indonesian island with a coastline nearly as long as that of the continental United States, Seacology is helping islanders build a community resource center, including a project that studies fish breeding grounds.

► On one of the oldest islands in the Pacific, the 18 million-year-old Mangaia in the Cook Islands, the group will build a boardwalk and a public rest room. In turn, the people, whose population has dropped from 4,000 to 800 in 15 years as the young have followed jobs elsewhere, have agreed to ban pesticides, garbage dumping, construction and tethering of animals within 150 feet of Lake Tiriarua. The lake opens into a cave in 200-foot-high cliffs of ancient coral reefs, uplifted by the movement of the Earth's crust.

"Why do we go to islands?" Silverstein said. "It's like that old joke, 'Why do you rob banks? That's where the money is.' Why do we save islands? That's where the world's extinction crisis is."

"Island ecosystems play an incredibly important role in supply-

ing the biological diversity of this planet. They are the great repository of the earth's biological and cultural diversity."

The Long Island native is a man who spends most of his time thinking about islands or traveling to islands. In his lifetime, he has traveled to 63 islands from Saltspring in Canada to the island of Babeldaob in Palau.

Three years ago, he left an influential job as executive director of the Goldman Fund to take the Seacology post and set up a small Berkeley headquarters for the international group. From the Bay Area, he oversees 54 projects.

Serving on Seacology's science advisory board are John McCosker, California Academy of Sciences marine biologist; Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis; author Edward O. Wilson, a Harvard University conservationist biologist; and oceanographer Sylvia Earle. All of them have documented the severe decline of diversity in island species.

In the past 400 years, 90 percent of all bird extinctions have occurred on islands, according to studies cited by Wilson. The probability of extinction has been about 40 times greater on islands

than continents. At the minimum, 2,000 species of birds have been lost on 800 major Pacific Islands, he wrote in "Biodiversity II."

Islands, particularly remote ocean islands, evolve over millions of years. The animals and plants don't have to compete with a wide range of other species. The dodo and the elephant birds survived without flying. But foreign ships brought in humans, disease and nonnative plants and animals that acted as predators on native species. Now, goats and pigs ransack nests and destroy vegetation.

Seacology was founded by ethnobotanist Paul Cox, director of the congressionally chartered National Tropical Botanical Garden in Kauai, Hawaii. Then a professor at Brigham Young University, he was studying the pristine rain forest surrounding the Samoan village of Falealupo.

The people there confided that they might have to sell 30,000 acres of the rain forest to loggers for the money to build a badly needed school. Cox immediately called his wife, Barbara, and they mortgaged their Salt Lake City house to raise \$85,000 to purchase the rain forest. In turn, the villagers signed a covenant protecting it for their own subsistence uses.

Now Seacology's board chairman, Cox decided to start the organization as a way to move fast on short, simple solutions for island people in trouble. His motto: "We can deal with grant requests on a piece of bark."

For his efforts in Samoa, Cox and the late High Chief Fuiono Senio shared the \$75,000 Goldman Environmental Prize.

Later, Cox raised more money for the village when he developed a cosmetic called Nu Skin with Nature's Way, based on plants used by the Samoan healers. The village receives proceeds of most of the sales, with Seacology getting 25 cents a tube, about \$160,000 a year.

"Most islands have no political voice. Either they're colonial possessions of some distant country or, if they're independent, they're not even in the Fourth World. Who's heard of Tuvalu? Who cares?" said Cox, referring to the South Pacific island nation threatened by inundation.

"We worry about all the oceanic islands. Their cultures are very focused on protecting resources, and they know the most about the problems. Continental people can always move on," said Cox, speaking from his office overlooking

the tropical botanical gardens in Kauai.

Seacology has a modest annual operating budget of \$900,000, a staff of three and a few part-time field representatives.

Supporters who are elected to the 24-member board must contribute a minimum of \$10,000. In the Bay Area, some of the members are Marsha Garces Williams, wife of actor Robin Williams; construction magnate Donald Arntz; and venture capitalist Paul Felton.

The benefits are taking sightseeing and diving trips to the islands, seeing unbelievably beautiful hidden spots and learning from indigenous peoples.

"You take them to Palau. They see incredible marine biodiversity, and they want to do anything they can for future generations," Silverstein said.

Just returning from a trip to remote Fijian villages on Vanua Levu, Ono and Yasawa Islands, Silverstein said, "You're dealing with wonderful people, wonderful cultures that are fast dying. A little money goes such a long way. We ask, 'What do you want?' — not say what they want."

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