

The Clock is Ticking
Our oceans are in a state of decline.

Story by: Bonnie McKenna

“Sitting in an auditorium at A.D.E.X. (Asian Dive Expo) in Singapore listening to people talk about how the oceans are slowly being destroyed by ‘global warming,’ human waste, plastic and over-fishing; I was struck by how few of these ‘experts’ were doing anything to fix the problems they were discussing,” said Larry McKenna, founder of 11th Hour Heroes and Save Our Leatherbacks Operation (S.O.L.O.).

“I was at A.D.E.X. exhibiting and speaking about S.O.L.O. I began to wonder if our proven successes of finding methods to continue to save the leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) from extinction could be expanded. The question I asked myself was, how I could act on the pressing problems facing our oceans and make a difference, without diluting our turtle conservation efforts,” McKenna recalled. “What the speakers were saying was all about a wake-up call to think about our earth and what we should be doing to focus on the massive degradation of our seas.”

Since the S.O.L.O. program is functioning, mostly on its own, McKenna began to realize he wanted to point his efforts in a new direction. What he wants to do is just a bit different. His concept is to fund individuals or small groups of unsung people, in their villages or towns, who are following their own initiative; working to ‘make a difference.’

McKenna wanted a name for the new concept to graphically say time was running out to save our oceans; his all-volunteer directors came up with 11th Hour Heroes. The logo is a clock indicating the earth is one global-hour away from irreversibility unless we collectively turn our efforts to rehabilitate our oceans and educate the world about the challenges it is facing.

McKenna, the founder of the conservation program S.O.L.O., has been working tirelessly for the past 16-years to save the gigantic leatherback sea turtle from extinction. His program started by a chance meeting with a village chief while on a dive trip to the Raja Ampats. In conversation, the chief began talking about how few leatherback turtles come to his beach, when in the past there were hundreds. “So many,” the chief said, “that during the nesting time they piled over one another.” Before they parted company, the chief asked McKenna, “Can you help?”

The story piqued McKenna’s interest because he wanted to video the leatherback and see for himself what the chief was talking about. The captain of the dive boat he chartered refused to take him to the nesting beach. Undaunted, when the boat returned to Sorong, he rented a boat with four old diesel outboard motors, several barrels of fuel and a crew of three men. It was a rough ride around the “Birds Head” and only a guess as to the correct beach.

“The sun was setting, so we picked a spot and stopped, hoping we were in the right place,” McKenna related. “As the night wore on, the boatmen wanted to return to Sorong, telling me there were no turtles. I had to convince them to stay till morning. As we sat there watching the stars move across the sky, I heard one of the men say, ‘there is a big turtle and it is headed directly for us.’”

“I was transfixed as I watched this enormous turtle drag herself up onto the beach, dig a nest within three feet of where I was sitting and lay her eggs. As she turned back to the sea, I walked with her, talking to her and named her Sophie. Before disappearing into the surf, she looked at me and nodded her head. I had goose-bumps. This encounter, sparked a sense of inspiration in me to see Sophie and her eggs survive,” said McKenna. “I still get goose-bumps at each sighting.”

McKenna's efforts, since that time, has been to use all his experiences and talents to develop practical methods to achieve his self-imposed challenge: to reverse the extinction of this magnificent turtle. With the assistance of many Dive Equipment Manufacturers Association (DEMA) entrepreneurs, (Wyland, Ron Hand, Dan Emke, Michael AW, Bjorn Harms, the Disney Foundation, the Knopf family and hundreds of volunteers), S.O.L.O. became a reality. Since that time, the counter on the S.O.L.O. website (www.leatherbackturtles.org) has registered more than seven-million views. "I am happy people are watching and imitating our research findings and activities to aid in saving this magnificent turtle," McKenna opined.

"Since that time, we have been doing our best to get the word out about the plight of this living dinosaur, including personal pleas before the United Nations about the devastating effect of long-line fishing in the migratory path of the leatherback turtle. The U.N. General Assembly approved our request, but the fisheries refused to comply.

"S.O.L.O.'s conservation plan is multi-faceted; there is there is no single-fix to remedy each situation. We have implemented a three-prong approach to conserve the turtles: putting more hatchlings back into the sea, to involve the local villagers, as they are the ultimate stewards of the leatherbacks that nest on their beaches and educate the people of the world about this gigantic turtle's plight.

"How does 11th Hour Heroes fit into the S.O.L.O. equation?" a question McKenna is often asked. "By growing the foundation of S.O.L.O., which is reversing the process that led to the danger of extinction of the leatherback sea turtle. The natural progression that nourishes the symbiotic relationship of the food chain has been broken or destroyed by over-fishing and toxic rubbish. Our continuing focus is to reverse the process.

"No matter how you look at it, the 11th Hour is fast approaching. The experts agree, the global-clock is nearly out of time," McKenna emphasized.

11th Hour Heroes was established as a project within S.O.L.O., the existing, approved and recognized IRS 501©3 non-profit foundation. Donations to either project provide for an IRS tax exemption, per the existing and revised codes.

For more information go to: www.leatherbackturtles.org. www.11thHourHeros.org.

CUTLINE:

On the beach with nesting leatherback.

11th Hour logo

Baby leatherback

Larry on the beach with Papuans

First photo of Sophie with Akil