

Voyagers without Boundaries

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The plight of the critically endangered Western Pacific Leatherback turtle

The Bismarck Solomon Seas Ecoregion (BSSE), also known as the “Western Indo Pacific cradle of coral biodiversity” stretches from the Vogelkop (Doberai) Peninsula of Papua, Indonesia, across the Admiralty and Bismarck archipelagos of Papua New Guinea, to Makira Island of Solomon Islands, covering approximately 2.5 million sq km and is home to approximately 3 million people of which 80% rely on coastal resources for their livelihoods.

In 2003, WWF and partners facilitated an expert’s one week workshop in Madang, Papua New Guinea where participants were tasked to identify to the best of the knowledge and experience the biodiversity of the Bismarck Solomon Seas Ecoregion (BSSE) - coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass and their associated species, coastal and

pelagic fish and species of special concern (turtles, marine mammals and crocodiles). A vision statement to guide the outcomes of this workshop over the next 50 years was developed and included inspiring statements such as

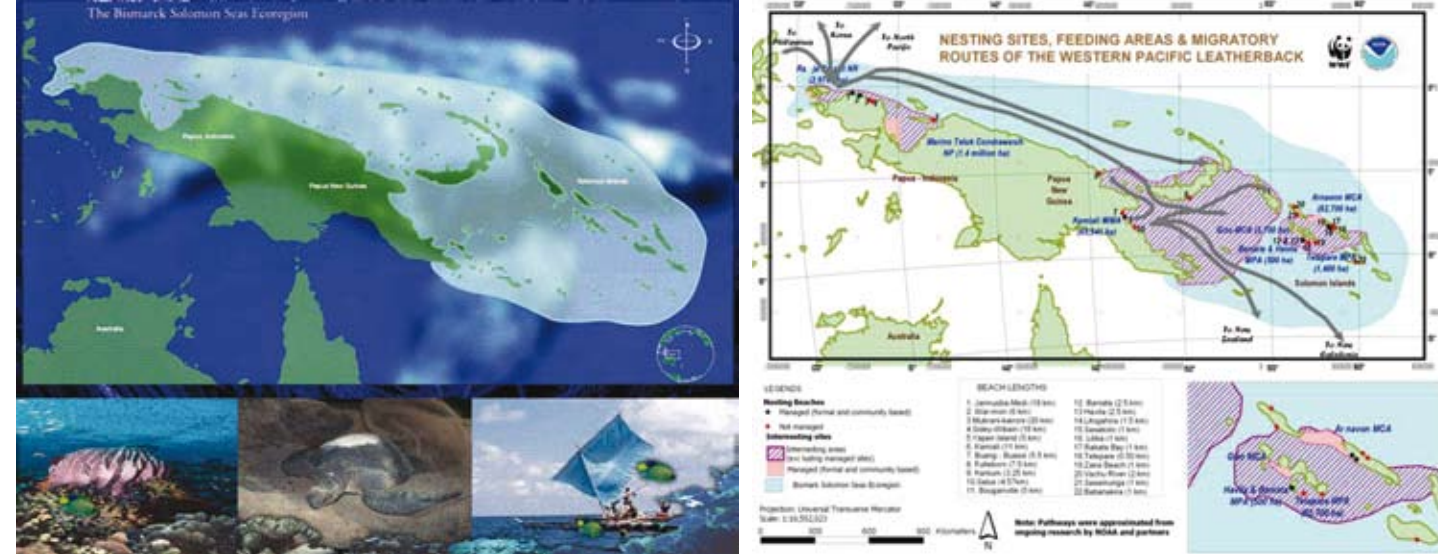
Over the week 48 priority areas of significant biodiversity were identified and a list of draft goals and targets that would help maintain and restore these areas to realise the vision were adopted. These components are the framework for the Ecoregion Conservation Plan being developed in partnership and collaboration with a diverse range of stakeholders which will inform and support local (e. g community management plans), national (e. g national biodiversity strategy action plans) and regional programmes (e. g the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), leading to

the conservation and sustainable use of the wealth of biodiversity and cultures that are present in this region.

The value of ecoregion programmes such as the BSSE is that they are implemented across political boundaries, focusing on providing management strategies at local, national and regional levels which are crucial for the protection of the home range of species which are highly migratory such as the Western Pacific Leatherback turtle.

Leatherback turtles are a globally and regionally important shared species that have been tracked via satellite on migration routes through the waters of the Bismarck and Solomon Seas on their way to feeding grounds around New Zealand, Philippines and the United States.

These turtles are culturally, economi-



cally and nutritionally important for the peoples of the Pacific and Indonesia, however, they are threatened from natural and human impacts with the Western Pacific Leatherback turtle on the verge of extinction. Leatherback turtles are globally threatened by human activities directly or indirectly, including egg poaching, habitat destruction, incidental mortality from fishing gears, pollution and poorly planned coastal development.

The conservation of species like the leatherback turtle is not an isolated endeavour but a pursuit that brings together governments and communities in a partnership that works across borders and supports both the health of the natural environments and the people that rely on these natural resources for their cultures and livelihoods.

The first stage in the development of the BSSE conservation plan was realised during the 36th Pacific Islands Forum Leaders meeting in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea when A Special Celebration organised by the Government of Papua New Guinea through the Department of Environment and Conservation and WWF and partners was held to acknowledge the leadership of communities that have “willing set aside areas within their customary coastal areas and waters for the nesting and nurturing of the critically endangered Western Pacific Leatherback turtle populations”. 40% of known beaches in the BSSE both primary and secondary fall under this commitment and includes 90% of the largest known nesting beaches in the three countries.

WWF leadership awards were presented by Mr. Jim Leape, WWF Director General Designate and Ms. Liz McLellan, WWF Asia Pacific Turtle Coordinator to

Mr Demianus Yesawan and Mr Benyaminus Yessa from Saubeba and Warmandi, Sorong district representing Papua, Indonesia, Mr. Philemon Tomala and Mr. Gassa Zibo (Huon Leatherback turtle network) and Mr Levi Ambio, Mr. Colin Maru, (Kamiali Integrated Coastal Development Group) from Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands (Tetepare Descendants Association) represented by community delegates Mr. Kennedy Soapi (Tetepare Island community) and Mr. George Hite (Baniata community).

The Celebration was also to announce the commitment of the three Governments to develop the Tri-national partnership to the conservation and management of Western Pacific Leatherback turtles at nesting sites, feeding areas and migratory routes in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. A first of its kind in this region this partnership covers the coastal areas and waters of the BSSE with specific attention to inter-nesting areas and migratory routes comprising of an estimated 5,95331.41 sq km of which about 2486 sq km has some form of management.

Although the partnership mainly focuses on the conservation of the Western Pacific Leatherback Turtles, it is hoped that it will also help the conservation of other marine species and their habitats in the region. A meeting was hosted by the Solomon Islands Government in February 2006 to finalise the wordings and endorse an implementation plan with a focus on management strategies for migratory routes and key corridors, sustainable fisheries practices, community capacity building, aligning of national, regional and internal policies and coordinating mechanisms. And a final signoff of the partnership took place in May 2006 in Bali, Indonesia.



Top left: Map of BSSE. Top right: Nesting and feeding sites of Leatherback turtle. Above Centre: Leatherback eggs and nest. Above: Leatherback monitors digging around the turtle to place monitoring harness on leatherback turtle.