

SAVING TURTLES

ONE EGG AT A TIME

An adult hawksbill turtle (main);
Ral Island in the Bismarck Sea
near Lissenung (inset).

PICTURES: LOUISE MURRAY



Visitors to Lissenung Island Resort can become involved in the resort's turtle conservation program. *Louise Murray* reports.

It's the school holidays, and eight youngsters from Eruk village in New Ireland are running excitedly along the beach towards our boat. Four of us are guests at Lissenung Island Resort, only 10 minutes away.

The children squeeze in among us and we set off, Benson skipping. His four-year-old son Stuart begs to be allowed to drive the boat and, under Dad's close supervision, beaming, he steers us the short distance to Ral Island, an uninhabited islet.

Before we even land, it is clear from the

tracks on the sand that a female turtle has laboriously hauled herself up the beach to dig out her nest above the high-water mark, depositing her eggs during the night. She has now returned to her natural environment to rest.

The kids join Benson in gently digging out the sand near her tracks to pinpoint the actual nesting site. Once found, the delicate operation of lifting out the freshly laid eggs begins. The children ready cardboard egg boxes by part-filling them with damp sand. It is important that the eggs remain in the same orientation ►



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that they were laid to avoid detaching the developing embryos.

The egg boxes are layered up in a cool box before being taken to our boat for transport back to Lissenung. There is one more island to check for nests before we drop off the children at the village and head back. You'd think that being excavated and transported might affect the viability of the eggs, but this is a tried and tested method that results in a very high proportion of babies hatching. Over 90 per cent of collected eggs hatch out on average, while in nature the figure is nearer to 70 per cent.

Dietmar and Ange Amon have been welcoming guests to their eight-cabin intimate island resort, just off Kavieng, New Ireland, for almost 30 years.

Uncrowded breaks attract surfers, and excellent dive sites in both the Bismarck Sea and the Pacific Ocean, a short boat ride from the island, appeal to scuba divers in the know. The Austrian-Australian couple are passionate ocean conservationists and have been collecting the eggs laid by critically endangered hawksbill and green turtles for 12 years.

Dietmar is waiting on the beach to transfer the eggs into a new artificial sand nest that is predator-proof. A random 10 eggs are weighed and measured. After carefully reburying the eggs, the nest is labelled with the estimated hatching date, some 60 days from now.

“Turtle eggs are an additional source of protein for local families. Our collections are eggs that would otherwise be eaten by villagers. We are trying to protect this critically endangered species. Involving the children in the collection work helps get the conservation message to their parents,” explains Dietmar.

This is not citizen science being done in ➤



Benson and children from Enuak Island search for a turtle nesting site on Real Island (above left); measuring a newly found egg (top); weighing a hatchling before it is released into the sea (above); Dietmar Amon readies a predator-proof artificial nest site for newly laid turtle eggs (left).

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isolation; all the data and the statistics are shared with one of Australia's top marine turtle scientists, Dr Colin Limpus. The program at Lissenung started after a chance visit to the island by a scientist from New Zealand. Out with Ange near Ral Island, they spotted local families digging up a nest and managed to get half of the clutch of eggs. Sixty days later the first turtle babies were born, and their conservation story began. After the excitement of being part of the collection process, Dietmar tells me some disappointing news. The next clutch of eggs,

A hawksbill turtle hatchling. The odds are against them, with only about one in 1000 surviving until adulthood. Most are eaten by hungry birds and fish.

due to hatch two days after Christmas, is due on the day I must leave Lissenung. But the baby turtles have different plans. On Christmas Day the first hatchlings make their way to the surface of their sandy nest, followed by the rest of the clutch, some 70 babies. Quite a Christmas present!

In nature, all of these would have died as they emerged in daylight, eaten by birds on the beach, and by hungry fish when they entered the ocean. But safe in their predator-proof artificial nest site they will survive, before being released by Ange under the cover of darkness.

Again, a random selection of 10 hatchlings is weighed and measured before being taken down to the beach. Only one in maybe 1000 babies will survive until adulthood, travelling on the ocean currents, feeding almost exclusively on sponges for 20 to 30 years. Females return to the same beaches where they were born, to complete the life cycle.

Life in the ocean is not free from hazards. Fisheries trap the animals in nets, leading to drowning; nesting beaches are developed for tourism and light pollution confuses nesting adults; and there is still a demand for their beautiful shells, even though trade in tortoiseshell has been banned for decades.

Over 20,000 hatchlings have been released by Dietmar and Ange over the 12 years of their conservation program, but the earliest mature females will return in 2032.

Visitors can be part of the critically endangered hawksbill and green turtle conservation program at Lissenung during the nesting and hatching season, which lasts from the middle of September until the end of April, but excellent diving can be experienced here all year round. ■

✈ Air Niugini flies from Port Moresby to Kavieng nine times a week. See airniugini.com.pg.

STAYING THERE

A double standard room at Lissenung Island Resort is PGK610 a night, all meals included. Return airport transfers are PGK160. Snorkelling, diving, fishing and surfing trips are available. Take a village tour to nearby Eruk Island to meet local families and experience their way of life.

See lissenung.com.

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