

Tides of time

East Rennell, in the Solomon Islands in the western Pacific, includes a lake, dense forest and rich biodiversity



JAEGER-LECOULTRE



The island's coral reef and lagoon are home to hundreds of animal species.

EAST RENNELL | Uncharted riches

A remote habitat on a raised coral atoll in the western Pacific

When the geologist Paul Dingwall evokes "a remote island location with unspoiled nature and stunning scenery," he might easily be referring to his native New Zealand. But he is actually describing a place more remote and, if anything, more spectacular. East Rennell is located on the southern third of the largest raised coral atoll in the world: Rennell Island in the Solomon Island group in the western Pacific. Since 1998, this 37,000-hectare (91,429 acre) expanse has been a World Heritage marine site, and Dingwall has visited it three times as part of his work for the World Heritage and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Dingwall's 35-year career (he retired in 2005 but continues to do consulting work) has been as a conservation scientist, working primarily for the New Zealand government. So it is unsurprising that he loves the natural environment of East Rennell, with its 15,500-hectare lake (the former lagoon on the atoll), dense forest boasting an average canopy of 20 meters (65 feet) and rich biodiversity. Its endemic species include the black water snake, the pied cormorant, the white ibis and the white-collared kingfisher.

Tourism was top of mind when East Rennell became a listed site, says Dingwall. The government of New Zealand

initially provided funds for the development of tourism infrastructure, including eco-lodges, motorized canoes and road transportation. But the site still lacked sustained Internet connectivity, marketing or ongoing facility maintenance. Then funding faltered during a period of domestic political disruption and has not yet come back.

What is needed, says Dingwall, in addition to infrastructure renovation, is marketing and operational savvy to encourage demand by foreign tourists. Such demand would encourage local efforts to redevelop the eco-lodges and manage the site for maximum efficiency.

Even reaching the site itself poses a challenge. Rennell Island has minimal links with other parts of the Solomon Islands, with only two air connections a week to the country capital of Honiara (an hour by plane) and sporadic shipping schedules (once every several weeks) to the capital. After landing on Rennell, the traveler still has a four-hour ride over an unpaved road before reaching the World Heritage site. Consequently, visitors are few and far between, and the site has yet to generate income that could be used to improve its facilities.

The lack of funds also means that the marine component of East Rennell is largely unexplored, says Dingwall, adding: "Its natural values and attributes remain unknown and undocumented." He acknowledges that although the site encompasses a marine area extending three nautical miles out to sea (to act as a buffer from external impacts), there has as yet been no survey, inventory, documentation or evaluation of the natural values of the marine area of East Rennell in the context of World Heritage.

The native residents are the direct managers of the site

Nevertheless, the geologist sees great potential in East Rennell. First and foremost, he loves the people, and describes the 1,200 native inhabitants as "generous, hospitable, friendly, God-fearing and trusting."

The native residents have a unique responsibility, in that they are the direct managers of the site. In fact, notes Dingwall, East Rennell was the first site on the World Heritage List to be managed by traditional native owners under customary practices.

Before 1997, he explains, a listed World Heritage property was supposed to be managed by the highest competent authority in the country, usually the government. "Gradually," he says, "the committee came to

realize that in many countries the land is owned and managed not by the government but by traditional owners — a common practice throughout Pacific Island countries, for example. So a policy change was necessary to allow such land to become World Heritage, and East Rennell led the way."

The World Heritage Centre and the IUCN are charged with evaluating potential threats to a site and reporting to the World Heritage Committee. A reactive monitoring mission to East Rennell took place in October, led by Dingwall, to assess the site in order to make recommendations to the World Heritage Committee and the State Party of Solomon Islands for improving its conservation. These findings will be available after the World Heritage Committee meeting in Phnom Penh in June.

"Over the past five years," says Dingwall, "the Australian government has made a commendable effort to build the capacity of the local people to manage their site and develop tourism," but this assistance is short term by definition. What is needed, he says, is a stronger commitment to the World Heritage site by the government of the Solomon Islands. At present, says Dingwall: "East Rennell remains the Solomon Islands' best kept secret as a tourist destination." C.F.

Preserving marine heritage

The Unesco World Heritage Centre's Marine Program 10-year strategy to protect the "crown jewels of the ocean" includes building an international network of World Heritage marine sites and facilitating their effective management. In this way, the Marine World Heritage network serves as a driver for improving ocean conservation globally.

"Tides of Time" is a partnership among Jaeger-LeCoultre, the Unesco World Heritage Centre's Marine Program and the International Herald Tribune. The series presents some of the people who are helping preserve marine sites on the World Heritage List. To see videos about World Heritage marine sites, visit the "Tides of Time" archive at whc.unesco.org/tidesoftime

ON THE GROUND | Unfettered nature

Remarkable for both its attributes and its integrity

Of all the islands scattered across the South Pacific, the most exceptional might be one that few people have ever heard of: Rennell Island in the Solomon archipelago. Rennell is the world's largest raised coral atoll. Its best-known landmark — Lake Tegano — is the largest lake in the insular Pacific. From sea snakes to shorebirds, the isle boasts a number of indigenous species. Even the human population stands out: a pocket of Polynesians in the middle of Melanesia.

Unesco recognized Rennell's extraordinary attributes in 1998 when it declared the island's eastern third a World Heritage site. Even that was a record of sorts: the first World Heritage natural site with customary ownership and management. But what really stood out was the site's integrity. As noted in the initial inscription: "The natural vegetation is little-modified by human impact and there are no serious invasive species of animals or plants. Both rats and alien land snails, which have decimated fauna of other islands, are absent."

"East Rennell was the first World Heritage listed site among the Pacific Island countries," says Kate McMahon, who manages an Australian government project to help the Solomon Islands strengthen World Heritage governance and management. "There is much pride in East Rennell



The marine component of East Rennell remains largely unexplored and undocumented.

throughout the Pacific, and it is wonderful to see other Pacific Island countries following the Solomon Islands' lead in seeking World Heritage listing."

Given its unusual geology, Rennell doesn't resemble a picture-postcard South Pacific island. Steep karst ridges covered in thick tropical vegetation shoot up straight

from the shore. The bluffs frame a limestone plateau covered in dense woods. The forest is largely undisturbed by humans and displays a number of adaptations to the frequent tropical cyclones that hit Rennell.

Lake Tegano occupies much of the island's eastern end. Originally a lagoon in the middle of the atoll, it was uplifted along with everything else. The water is brackish but supports a wide variety of marine life: more than 300 species of diatoms and algae as well as the Pacific short-finned eel and the small but poisonous Rennell Island sea krait. Rimmed by rain forest and spangled with small karst islands, the lake has a primeval feel, more like something from the planet's antediluvian past than a contemporary landscape.

Fitting through the forests and around the shorelines are 43 bird species, 11 different types of bat and around 730 insect species. A good number of these — like the Rennell flying fox, the Rennell shrikebill and the Rennell fantail — are endemic. There are also 10 native plants, a number of native land snails and the Rennell monitor lizard. Although not unusual by South Pacific standards, the coral reef and lagoon that surround the island boast hundreds of other animal species.

"While East Rennell is listed as a natural site," says McMahon, "the cultural values are very special as well." Four villages cluster near the lake's western end. The majority of islanders trace their roots to a reverse migration of Polynesians that took place around 1400 A.D., when people from Wallis Island in the central Pacific decided to backtrack rather than plunging farther eastward into the unknown. Rennell remained literally off the map until 1801, when it was encountered by British mariners. Today's islanders speak a Polynesian dialect similar to Maori.

So far, humanity's impact on Rennell has been surprisingly light. But that's not to say there aren't threats. Climate change has spurred higher water levels and salinity in Lake Tegano, factors that are adversely affecting plant growth, including that of major local food crops like taro and coconut. Any logging in western Rennell could greatly affect the flora and fauna inside the park, in particular the endemic birds.

"While the site has been effectively managed by the local community," says McMahon, "there is still no legal protection for the site." The lack of environmental protection laws increases the risk of resource extraction on Rennell Island. But the province and national governments are currently moving to remedy the situation. "These steps are very positive moves toward the protection of East Rennell," says McMahon. J.R.Y.

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Time is on the side of invention

Is necessity the mother of invention, as Plato pronounced more than 2,300 years ago, or is invention the mother of necessity, according to Albert Einstein in the 20th century?

Both are true for the inventions of Jaeger-LeCoultre, the Swiss watchmaker that has been creating innovative ways to keep track of time for the last 180 years. Invention is part of the company's corporate culture, as evinced by the 398 patents it has been awarded since 1833, when it was founded by Antoine LeCoultre.

LeCoultre was an indefatigable inventor from a young age. He developed new metal alloys and improved the quality of sound in music boxes, but he was most attracted to what some call the noblest of the mechanical arts: watchmaking.

Watchmaking was the high-tech industry of the 19th century, encompassing precision, innovation, and industrial application. LeCoultre's genius in all these pursuits would revolutionize the world of watches and transform Switzerland's Vallée de Joux — where he established his original workshop in 1833 — into the cradle of Haute Horlogerie.

As of today, Jaeger-LeCoultre has created 1,242 mechanical gauges for time pieces, as well as more than 190 chronograph calibers and more than 200 chronograph minute repeater calibers. The latter have been described by Hedy Woodrow, vice president of retail at Wynn Las Vegas, in an article in *vegasmagazine.com*, as "some of the rarest and most highly crafted watches in existence. Minute repeaters are the ultimate prize for serious watch collectors."

Inventive treasures such as minute repeaters are only one example of Jaeger-LeCoultre's innovative excellence. Other innovations include the 101 Calibre, one of the world's smallest mechanical movements; the Atmos, with its unique perpetual movement; the swivel case of the Reverso; the Gyrotourbillon and the Sphérotourbillon.

Establishing his first workshop for all trades under one roof, Antoine LeCoultre made such innovations possible. His founding principles have guided Jaeger-LeCoultre ever since, enabling the company to create the future based on solid traditions of the past. C.F.

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