

AN ISLAND HERO

PNG's Filip Damen gets undaunted environment award

By Carynne McIver

A DECADE AGO, WHEN FILIP DAMEN TAUGHT himself to read and write to defend his homeland forest in the Madang Province of Papua New Guinea, he never dreamt it was the beginning of a journey that would take him across the ocean to San Francisco, California.

On October 8, Damen's undaunted environmentalism was honoured with a reception and \$10,000 award at the 17th annual Seacology Prize Ceremony at the Aquarium of the Bay in San Francisco.

The Seacology Prize highlights the heroic efforts of people who seldomly receive any publicity—indigenous leaders who risk their own lives and well-being to protect their island's ecosystems and culture.

Since the inception of the prize in 1992, Seacology has given the award to 18 native islanders in recognition of their innovative and courageous work.

At the ceremony, Damen was accompanied by Dr George Weiblen, a Professor of Biology at the University of Minnesota who has conducted research in Papua New Guinea for over a decade.

Weiblen served as a translator, conveying Damen's gratitude for the prize and passion for his native home.

In addition to the presentation by Damen and Weiblen, the audience of nearly 100 also heard a speech on the history of Seacology by Executive Director Duane Silverstein, as well as remarks by Paul Cox, Seacology's co-founder and board chairman.

Damen's story embodies the spirit of the Seacology Prize. Born and raised in the village of Wanang, he has spent a lifetime in the lowland rainforest of Papua New Guinea.

Intimately familiar with the ecological, cultural, and practical value of the forest, Damen resisted the PNG government when it attempted to turn his land over to loggers 10 years ago.

Teaching himself to read and write, he led a group of 11 local clans to sign a historic conservation deed that defiantly protected 25,000 acres of forest from interference by loggers or the government.

Papua New Guinea's lowland tropical rainforest is an ecological wonderland. Exceeded only by the Amazon and Congo basin, it is the third largest tract of primary tropical forest left on earth.

The forests play a critical role in the local



Inspiring...2009 Seacology Prize Winner Filip Damen (left) and Professor George Weiblen captivate the audience with Damen's inspiring story. Below: Damen with Seacology board president Ken Murdock and chairman Paul Cox.



environment, controlling rainfall, maintaining water supplies, and stabilising soils in addition to hosting a rich storehouse of the planet's rare species and plants.

Papua New Guinea forests are especially unique in that tribal landowners and subsistence farmers, rather than the state government or large companies, are the primary stakeholders.

Each year 2.5% of the remaining PNG rainforests is degraded by commercial logging and subsistence agriculture.

Logging is systematically changing these forests forever, enticing tribal landowners with short-term cash and infrastructure. The results have a devastating effect on the traditional way of life.

At the same time, refusing logging means a loss of potential income for the community.

With extraordinary vision, Damen worked with the PNG government and the Bintang Research Center to use Wanang for long-term forest conservation research.

This partnership ensures jobs, healthcare, and schooling for his people, while preserving their forests and cultural heritage.

Under Damen's leadership, Wanang landowners have joined an international collaboration to study the dynamics of rainforests around the globe and the rainforest's response to climate change.

A new research station is providing advancement for his community. This year, the clans built classrooms out of bush materials, attracted two registered teachers and enrolled over 70 students, including many from villages in the surrounding logging concession.

Damen's visionary actions have spared the forest and village of his homeland, and he continues to serve as a respected community leader and regional magistrate.

In Damen, Seacology recognised the same grassroots-inspired change that it funds in island projects worldwide.

With the sole purpose of preserving the environments and cultures of the islands, Seacology works locally and directly with indigenous people.

Their win-win approach to conservation funds basic needs facilities or programmes in exchange for the creation of terrestrial or marine protected areas.

To-date, Seacology has launched 194 island-based projects, saving 1,816,030 acres of marine ecosystems and 166,478 acres of increasingly rare terrestrial habitat.

In return for establishing island marine and forest reserves, Seacology has helped islanders build 87 facilities such as schools, community centers, solar energy systems, and other critically-needed structures, and funded 30 programmes providing scholarships, vital medical services and supplies for island communities.

Though Damen spent only a few days in California before returning to his home, his impressions of the United States will surely remain with him, just as his own remarkable story will continue to inspire Seacology's mission.

• Carynne McIver is a development assistant with Seacology.