

# Odyssey of Life

Photos by Jürgen Freund



Wildlife photographers **Jürgen** and **Stella Freund** are collecting unforgettable experiences as well as images on the milestone WWF Coral Triangle Photo Expedition. **Alya B. Honasan** meets them.

It was pitch black on a moonless night on the remote stretch of beach that is Jamursbamedi, on the Bird's Head Peninsula of Papua. As her husband, photographer Jürgen Freund, snapped away, Stella Freund held in her hand a frisky, wriggling baby leatherback turtle that looked like it couldn't wait to get into the water.

The little creature faced an uncertain future, however, as the most endangered of the world's seven marine turtle species, even here in its largest remaining nesting site, where the leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*), locally known as *tabob*, is still hunted for its meat and eggs.

After a week of photographing the animals as they nested, the Freunds – collectively known as the internationally renowned wildlife photographic team Freund Factory – were positively awed by the magnificence and gentleness of the leatherbacks.

"A pregnant mother goes up against all odds to give birth, and goes to great lengths to hide her eggs from predators," says Stella. "Their instincts make them do amazing things."

Some of these leatherbacks, tagged by scientists, even swim all the way to California, USA, to feed on jellyfish bloom. It's a yearlong odyssey across all kinds of waters, against every sort of obstacle – a testament to this ancient mariner's tenacity.

Stella fought back tears as she prayed for the baby leatherback's survival. "I kept whispering to it not to eat plastic!" she recalls, laughing.

The leatherback encounter was just the latest on an ever-growing list of unforgettable experiences being chalked up by the Freunds on a unique journey that began last April, when the couple set out on an 18-month expedition across the waters of five nations of the Coral Triangle.

Commissioned by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the nongovernment environmental organization founded in 1961 that is immersed in the fight to save the world's biodiversity, reduce pollution and ensure renewable resource use, the Freunds are shooting their way through the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands on the WWF Coral Triangle Photo Expedition, photographing this vast place, its people and the extraordinary species that live and thrive here.

Covering some six million square kilometers and the territorial waters of the aforementioned five countries, plus Timor Leste, the Coral Triangle has been identified by WWF as an area of enormous natural as well as economic importance. It's home to 75 percent of the world's coral species, more than half of the world's reefs, six of the world's seven marine turtle species and the bulk of the Earth's fish, mangrove and seagrass species.

It is also home to some 120 million people, most of whom turn to the sea to survive, and has a nature-based tourism industry with an estimated revenue of US\$12 billion every year.

"The Coral Triangle is one of the planet's last remaining true marine wildernesses, on par with the Amazon Rainforest or the Congo Basin in terms of its importance to life on Earth," says Dr. Lida Pet Soede, leader of the Coral Triangle Program of WWF, which is working with partners to manage the many issues that are threatening this hotbed of biodiversity, precisely because of its expanse and richness.

Among these threats are depleted stocks of economically important reef fish and tuna because of overfishing and unsustainable fishing methods, endangered charismatic species such as the turtles, and the growing specter of climate change. WWF has been present in the Coral Triangle region for some 15 years, and has been working with partners to develop more sustainable fisheries, reduce the impacts of climate change and tourism, and help create a network of international Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to protect species. (See [www.panda.org/coral-triangle](http://www.panda.org/coral-triangle).)

"It is critical that we bring the beauty of and the threats to this region to the attention of the world," says Pet Soede. "Already we are seeing many governments, both in the Coral Triangle and outside, recognizing the importance of this marine wilderness."

"But WWF wants more people to sit up and take notice, so we have commissioned one of the world's best wildlife photographic teams, Jürgen and Stella Freund, to undertake a comprehensive expedition through the Coral Triangle to document its unique species, coral reefs and coastal habitats, as well as the lives of those who depend on the health of the Coral Triangle for their livelihoods."

Indeed, the trip has been comprehensive – and amazing – so far, after three legs in the Philippines, Malaysia and parts of Indonesia. The Freunds have camped atop a sandbar with the rangers of the Tubbataha Natural Marine Park in the Philippines, the guardians of Southeast Asia's only purely marine UNESCO World Heritage Site and the country's first MPA. They chased turtles all over Sipadan, Malaysia's diving playground, catching two in the process of mating (a first in Jürgen's three-decade career), and climbed on board trawlers and tuna fishing boats in Kudat, Sabah's fish basket.

Then there were the nights spent waiting for the nesting leatherbacks in Jamursbamedi. The adventure is being documented in detail through an expedition blog, <http://blogs>.



[panda.org/coral\\_triangle](http://panda.org/coral_triangle), which Stella updates regularly with stories and photographs to take readers everywhere on their journey.

"We often say the most uncomfortable living conditions bring the best pictures," Stella muses. "To find leatherbacks, we needed to camp on a beach with just a tarpaulin above our heads for short naps."

Throughout the expedition, in fact, Stella recalls how they would swing from luxury to Spartan – "from a fishing village in Malampaya Sound to a five-star live-aboard boat (for free!) in Komodo. But it's when we rough it that we meet the most amazing characters.

"We can't forget the sad eyes of the man who lost his arm because of dynamite fishing in Taytay, Palawan. What a hard, hard life he lives."

The Friends, long-time collaborators of WWF, were an obvious choice for this mammoth project.

"Jurgen and Stella have worked successfully with WWF on many occasions in the past, and we cannot recommend them highly enough in terms of their creativity, their professionalism, and detailed knowledge of the subject matter," says Paul

Sunters, managing editor of the WWF Global Photo Network of WWF International, who commissioned the Friends late last year.

Jürgen, an engineer and self-taught photographer originally from Dortmund, Germany, has been taking photographs for 32 years. Stella, a Chinese-Filipino by birth, studied social sciences at the Ateneo de Manila and worked as an advertising and documentary producer. The two met and married in Manila, when Jürgen was shooting for WWF-Philippines, and Stella had to use some of his photographs for an ad campaign.

The couple, now based in Cairns, Australia, has traveled the world on assignments from various international publications. Their first award-winning photo book collaboration with WWF-Philippines, *Sulu-Sulawesi Seas*, was published in 2001.

The Friends, who arrived in Indonesia in July, have been exploring the archipelago before traveling to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in early 2010. Already, they have taken thousands of pictures of the people and creatures that make the Coral Triangle a truly special place.

"It never ceases to amaze us how much the ocean has given, and how much more it can give," Stella says. "It also makes us realize the urgency of sustainability. But we have also developed so much respect for the people living with the sea. As much as there is biodiversity underwater, there are religious, cultural and racial differences within the Coral Triangle.

"Still, humanity and generosity are understood everywhere. We all feel like we belong to one WWF family, and it's a great feeling to belong to it."

