Raja Ampat Pioneers – Edi Frommenwiler and Pindito by Don Silcock

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Administrators Note: *Don Silcock is an Australian underwater photographer and photojournalist based in Bali, Indonesia. His non-commercial website, Indo-Pacific Images, is full of interesting articles of experiences from his extensive travels. He has been a supporter of the Bird's Head Seascape since its inception. He has done and will continue to do articles about diving in the BHS and its pioneers. Don has generously and kindly offered to share his stories with us. Lucky us! Thanks Don.*

Raja Ampat Pioneers – Edi Frommenwiler and Pindito

Edi Frommenwiler and Pindito – I have a theory… Completely unproven of course, but very logical (well, to me at least). And it's that true adventurers have seven genotypes, rather than six like the rest of us.

Let's just call it the AA++ genotype and those individuals with one have inherited an intense desire to explore the world and can never accept a nine-to-five existence.

They tend to embark upon their first big adventures in any way they can, as soon as they can. And, in the case of Edi Frommenwiler his chance came by driving trucks in his native Switzerland.

Edi Frommenwiler

But we are not talking about delivering stuff to supermarkets or longer haul across Europe. None of that for Edi, this was delivering heavy machinery and specialist building materials to places like Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

In total he did 18 of those trips, over a two-year period in the mid 1970's, all while still in his early twenties. Enabling him to save enough money for the next stage – two years of almost exclusively overland backpacking.

That journey took him to places like Nepal, Burma (before it was Myanmar), south-east Asia, Australia and New Zealand. Along the way, in 1980 he made his first visit to Indonesia.

The country that would become his home and where he would have his biggest and longest adventure!

But in between the backpacking trip and his biggest adventure, Edi spent 10 years as a tour guide in places like Brazil, Venezuela, Nepal. And occasionally back to Indonesia to take guests to *Lamalera*, the remote village in Nusa Tenggara where traditional, subsistence whaling was practiced.

Edi Frommenwiler and Pindito – Indonesia Beckons

Edi first heard about Indonesia when he was quite young. From his father who owned a motorcycle repair shop and had agreed to sponsor a missionary with a bike and spare parts to take to Maumere where he was going to work with the poor.

Both the bike and the missionary made it to Maumere where they both became quite well-known. So much so that the locals christened him "Brother Tuk-Tuk".

It was during those trips to Lamalera that Edi had had the idea of building a *real* boat… Away from places like Bali, tourism infrastructure in Indonesia back in the 1980's was almost non-existent. So, to get his guests to Lamalera, Edi had no other option but to hire local boats. Many of which he considered decidedly "dodgy".

A custom-built boat with guest cabins, ensuites and serving good food. Able to take adventurous tourists to some of the amazing off the beaten track places in Indonesia seemed like a wonderful way to earn a living!

Edi Frommenwiler and Pindito – Getting it Together…

As most people know, it's one thing to have a good idea but quite another to make it all happen. Having a good idea in Indonesia, and actually making it happen is on a completely different scale. Even today, with a pro-business government in Jakarta, achieving success is really tough.

In 1990 it bordered on the almost impossible. But Edi Frommenwiler does not do impossible and believes that there is always a way through. So, in May of that year, he went back to Indonesia to work out how and where he could build his boat and how much it would all cost.

Back in Switzerland at the end of June he embarked on what we would now call *crowdfunding*… Starting with his family and friends, then following leads that came out of that process. He slowly but surely, raised the capital needed to build the boat.

Then in September he set off for Jakarta, where he spent what he considers were possibly the worst three months of his life. Living in a small, cheap hotel while he found a way through the labyrinth-like bureaucracy in the nation's capital. Something that was once described to me as akin to swimming in glue.

But succeed he did and by December he was in possession of a PMA. The formal permission to conduct business in Indonesia at that time. So highly prized were those PMA's that Edi's was one of just 20 that were approved and signed by the Indonesian President Suharto at the end of 1990!

Building Pindito

In early 1991 Edi moved to Pulau Laut, the large island on the south-eastern tip of South Kalimantan in Indonesian Borneo. Where he had found the people and materials he needed to build his boat.

But first there were a couple of really important things to get his head around – AutoCAD and BKI… Edi had decided to design the boat himself. And to do that he had to learn the industry standard software AutoCAD.

For the uninitiated, AutoCAD is fantastic software but very complex and learning it to build your first boat is a bold move.

Laying the keel of Pindito

Particularly so when you are also learning how to work with the German Lloyds approved *Indonesian BKI marine standards*!

But fortune favours the bold and by the end of March 1991 a huge 12m by 30m hole had been dug in the clay near the beach to create a drydock and the boat's keel had been laid.

Construction continued through 1991 and the boat was safely floated for the first time by breaking through the dry dock wall.

There is a short video available on YouTube about *building the Pindito*. Which makes really interesting watching and starts with that huge hole being dug – by hand… to create the dry-dock where the massive keel is laid.

By early 1992 Edi had named the boat MV Pindito. And his youngest brother, who was in the travel business in Switzerland, was actively promoting the initial trips on the very first liveaboard in Indonesia!

Pindito – Almost Finished...

Edi Frommenwiler and Pindito – Raja Ampat

Back in 1992 very little was known about Raja Ampat in what was then called the province of Irian Jaya. Nobody was diving there and virtually nothing was known about what was underwater.

Edi had heard rumours about how incredibly scenic the area was. So he studied charts of the area and reached the conclusion that so many islands there just had to some great places to explore underwater.

In September of 1992 he decided to go and explore further. A trip which convinced him that he had discovered an amazing jewel. So much so that the whole rationale for Pindito changed from a liveaboard island hopper to liveaboard dive boat!

Arborek Island in Raja Ampat's Dampier Strait

Obviously that change came at a cost. But it seemed worth it as the underwater potential of Raja Ampat appeared to be immense. However nobody, including Edi, had any idea just how immense it actually was.

Bear in mind that 1992 was before the words Coral and Triangle had been associated with each other. And the Indonesian Throughflow was just being quantified and understood. In many ways Edi's first trip was like discovering an Indonesian Galapagos hidden in plain sight.

Quite amazingly, for 10 years Edi Frommenwiler had the greater Raja Ampat area to himself. As Pindito was the only boat operating there. The guests who came on the boat during those years were truly experiencing something very unique...

But, not all *Kumbaya*…

As wonderful as that story is, it was not all kumbaya around the campfire. The very isolation of Raja Ampat meant that its incredible biodiversity and intense marine life was wide open to be pillaged without any recourse.

Edi tells the story about first visiting the remote Ayu Islands in the far north of Raja Ampat around 1993. After dropping the anchor out from one of the villages, the locals quickly got in their boats. And headed for Pindito with their spears and machetes!

Clearly, they were very angry at something. But Edi did not understand what but sensed the danger around the highly unusual reception. Luckily Edi's Indonesian wife Ella was on board and was able to establish some dialog with the villagers.

Learning that their reefs had been effectively decimated from cyanide fishing carried out by a small fleet of rogue boats.

To put that in perspective, for the villagers on those remote islands their reefs are the primary source of nutrition and it's how the fishermen feed their families.

The health of those reefs is of paramount importance. And like many fishing communities in Indonesia the people of the Ayu Islands practice *Adat* traditional practices to manage them and the fish stocks.

To have those rogue fishing boats come in like they did. Using cyanide to harvest en-masse almost all their fish and damage the reefs in the process was simply life-threatening.

And why they were so angry when they thought Pindito was there to do more cyanide fishing!

Edi Frommenwiler and Pindito – Conservation

Being the first liveaboard dive boat in Raja Ampat. And for 10 years the only boat meant that Edi was able to establish a strong reputation and good relationships with key people. And in 1996 the *Bupati* (regional leader) of the Raja Ampat regency reached out to him wanting to know what could be done locally to attract more investors and tourism operators to the area.

Raja Ampat MPA Network

Sensing a unique opportunity, Edi explained the paradox of underwater Raja Ampat. In that its incredibly rich biodiversity was also its biggest threat as it would be ruthlessly exploited unless it was protected.

It took quite a bit more work, but ultimately the *Bupati* asked which parts of Raja Ampat should be protected. So Edi drew some circles on a map of the area. It turned out that the Indonesian government were drawing up a management and development plan for Raja Ampat and had asked the *Bupati* for his input.

It took a few more years to come together but in 2004 the first Marine Protected Area (MPA) was established. And over the years since another 8 MPA's have been put in place. With some 2m hectares or 44% of the total 4.6m marine area of Raja Ampat now protected. *Administrator's note: There are currently 26 MPA's protecting over 5m hectares in the entire Bird's Head Seascape of which Raja is one of the Crown Jewels.*

It is a source of considerable pride to Edi that those circles he drew on the map for the *Bupati* form the core areas of that MPA network. Particularly so the one around the Ayu Islands!

An Adventurous Life with More to Come!

I like to think that I have an adventurous streak and have done a lot of stuff… But whenever I talk to people like Edi Fromenwiler I start to think that in reality I have lead a sheltered life.

The scope and magnitude of what Edi has accomplished is simply tremendous. But what is amazing to me is the passion that still burns deeply within him to discover more of the underwater wonders of the vast Indonesian archipelago.

I hope to return to my home in Bali next year and join Edi on one of his exploration trips as he seeks to unlock more secret places just like he did all those years ago with Raja Ampat!

Edi Frommenwiler and Pindito – X-Ray Mag Article

The highly respected global diving magazine X-Ray recently published a five-page article of mine on *Edi Frommenwiler and Pindito* and you can download it on the link provided.

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