

## Fiji expedition 2013



After the Oceania Chondrichthyan Society meeting in Brisbane I went to Fiji to present my research at the University of South Pacific, in Suva. Dr. Khairul Azam invited me there who I met during the Manta Ray Symposium in Orlando, in August and is a professor at the marine biology department. Dr. Khairul was a great host and showed me around at the University and introduced me to his students and many professors as well.



While I was in Suva I also visited a poor village elementary school with especially under-privileged kids. I talked to them about my story and my love and dedication to manta rays and I am hoping that I could encourage them to fight for their dreams even if they start their lives with limited resources. I took some school supplies for them which was very needed and they danced and sang to me, and they all draw beautiful manta rays in return. With the help of the Pacific Outreach Foundation they will hopefully get further help in the future.

After a few days in Suva I headed to the Barefoot Island to see manta rays! The island is officially called Drawaqua and is about 4 hours north west from the mainland with a large, fast catamaran. The islands we passed on the way were already amazingly beautiful, but I could not imagine such paradise that was waiting for me at the Barefoot Island. A friendly welcome song on the beach by the locals and the postcard perfect beach took my breath away while stepping on the white sand.



I just settled in my little hut by the beach when the drums signalled: a manta ray was seen in the channel so we should run to the boats to go out and see it! I could not even wake up from the dream of being at such a beautiful place when they call me to see a manta?? Now I was convinced, this IS paradise!!!



We snorkelled for about 30 minutes with a beautiful young, black manta in the strong current which was feeding near the surface. The island is an excellent location for future research because the animals are approachable by boat in just a few minutes and at certain times of the year they are there almost every day.



Sunrise beach, Manta ray channel, Sunset Beach

During the week I met some very kind, interesting people who came to spend one or a few days on the island and wonderful people who worked and lived in this paradise. It is a unique place where nature and people live in harmony and respect each other. We are hoping to establish manta ray research projects in the future to help the community better understand these animals and to find out more about the biology and movement patterns of the mantas. During my stay, the Barefoot Island resort- to show their support and dedication to help these magnificent creatures- became the very first distribution center of Manta Memories items and will support the most critical manta ray fishing communities in Indonesia ([www.mantamemories.org](http://www.mantamemories.org))!

While waiting for manta rays to pass the channel every day I learned a lot from local people who showed us how to break coconut with bare hands, make baskets from palm tree leaves and who also made me cry with their beautiful farewell song when my time came to leave the island.



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