

PARADISE Q&A

TIM FLANNERY



Tim Flannery (left) with Rod Morris, a guide and lecturer on the *Heritage Adventurer*.

Scientist, conservationist and writer Tim Flannery is blessed with an insatiable curiosity and sense of adventure. It's the time he spends in PNG that really excites the deep thinker, who has been described by Sir David Attenborough as being in the league of all-time great explorers. *Fiona Harper* reports.

Q: What ignited your initial interest in Papua New Guinea?

A: I remember when I was in around Year 7 or 8 a group of Papua New Guineans came to our school from a sister school on Yule Island. I was too shy to really speak to them, but I was intrigued. This was really the beginning

of my interest in PNG. I was always a great reader and was interested in animals, and as I started studying I realised that there are animals in PNG that we were only finding as fossils in Australia. I'm a palaeontologist and mammalogist and 'climate person', but the first 20 years of my career were spent in

Melanesia and PNG doing fauna surveys of mammals.

Q: What it is about PNG that keeps luring you back?

A: PNG is the most special place on Earth. I find there is so much to learn here. One time I met the most extraordinary man who was



a specialist tree kangaroo hunter. I had a list of the names of animals I wanted to find, and as soon as I mentioned the tree kangaroo, he transformed himself into the animal, imitating the way they move their head, their face and the way their eyes move. As I went through the list, each time he transformed himself into this creature. It was quite extraordinary.

I feel a great deal of gratitude to the people who have shared their knowledge with me, and I have benefited from experiencing a fundamentally different culture. For the past 20-odd years I've been trying to set up community conservation organisations to help Papua New Guineans benefit by conserving biodiversity.

Q: What brings you back to PNG this time?

A: I'm a guest lecturer onboard *Heritage Adventurer (HA)* on an 18-day voyage from Bali to Madang. I've been working with New Zealand-based Heritage Expeditions since around 2017, when I met Aaron Russ and

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realised his father was Rodney Russ (Heritage Expeditions' founder). Rodney and Rod Morris (guide and lecturer onboard *HA*) were part of the crew that rescued some of the most endangered birds, the Chatham Island Black Robin, in New Zealand back in the 1970s. These people were my heroes.


It's four years since I was last here and it's changed a lot. Changes happen fast when the language is not written, where language

evolves quickly because it's very flexible. I find myself speaking 'old man's pidgin'. Community conservation associations help to give back to those who have helped me, and this is partly why I'm here.

Q: What's putting a smile on your face?

A: Working in Melanesia again and catching up with some old friends after 30 years. Having lived in a number of traditional societies, I find it endlessly wondrous being in this culture again. If you want examples of good leadership, look in the villages around here. I was in a meeting two days ago to talk about the conservation association. A great Melanesian leader sat there listening, not saying much until towards the end. He said a few things that guided the conversation and then other people picked up on his ideas. It's that sort of quiet, respectful leadership that influences my admiration for Melanesian culture. ■

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