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Guardian Of Paradise

By Terry McCarthy/Palau

Fifty feet below the surface of Ulong Channel off the coast of Palau, Noah Idechong points excitedly at a large fish lurking under a fan coral. It is a brown marbled grouper, quite rare, but a favorite of Chinese restaurants around Asia. It looks back at him warily, not knowing that Idechong is a main reason the fish and many other marine creatures are still alive on Palau's reefs instead of stir-fried on restaurant plates in Hong Kong.

Palau is renowned for its marine life. Divers and scientists from around the world fly to this Pacific archipelago 500 miles (800 km) east of the Philippines to view its parrot fish, gobies, damselfish, sharks, turtles, butterfly fish and stately Napoleon wrasses. The Blue Corner on the western reef is rated one of the world's top dive sites for its abundance of big fish. With 1,387 species at last count, Palau has more fish varieties than any other area of Micronesia. But a decade ago, all this was threatened by fishermen. A short boat ride from Ulong takes you to another channel that has been almost emptied of fish.

"That big grouper under the coral," says Idechong, 47, after he has heaved himself back onto the boat. "If there was still fishing in this area, you would never have seen him--he would have taken off immediately."

Palauans have always lived from the sea, but it was not until the mid-'80s that overfishing became a problem. After a half-century as a U.S. trust territory, Palau was preparing for independence in 1994--and promoting commercial fishing for export as a way of earning a living on its own.

"I realized early on that we had no surveys--we didn't even know what we had," says Idechong, who worked for the government's Division of Marine Resources from 1978 to '94. "There was no management program at all. And that scared me." Idechong began studies in 1988--and, crucially, started talking with the local fishermen. By sharing information, Idechong got a picture of what species were in danger, while the fishermen learned how to manage fish stocks for the longer term. "By working with them we ended up getting a lot of support."

Idechong's work culminated in the Marine Protection Act of 1994, which banned export of certain species and regulated the fishing for others. "The law went into effect just in time," says Idechong, who drafted it in 1990 but had to wait four years for the political leadership to approve.

Raised in Ngiwal, a fishing village on Palau's largest island, Babeldaob, Idechong had his eyes opened to nature's riches only when he left for a year of high school in the U.S. in 1970. He spent that period amid the

lakes and forests around Pine City, Minnesota--"one of the best times of my life"--and realized that "wildlife was the field I wanted to be in."

He went to college in Hawaii and then returned to Palau, where he started working for the government. In 1994 he founded the Palau Conservation Society, the archipelago's only homegrown non-governmental organization. He has traveled to Britain, Canada, Italy, the Solomon Islands and Fiji to study, but Idechong has never strayed too far from his village roots. Every time he begins a conservation program, his first instinct is to confer with the village elders. He is now starting to focus on ways of protecting the dugong (sea cow) and the hawksbill turtle, both of which are vulnerable to fishermen. He is optimistic because two decades of his campaigning have shown the majority of Palauans the logic behind conservation. "I don't think the next generation will eat turtle, for example," he says. His success in preserving Palau's marine life is also beginning to win over other Pacific islands. "The FSM [Federated States of Micronesia] and Pohnpei are planning to follow what we did," he says.

Idechong is not done with his worrying, though. As the government plans to build roads, golf courses and more hotels to boost tourism, he sees more dangers on the horizon for the country's ecosystem. "Palau right now needs visionaries--people who can say what they want Palau to look like 50 years from now, and what we must do now to make that happen." In other words, more people with Idechong's kind of vision.

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