

# Spreading the word about tsunamis

Scientists and filmmakers are joining forces to warn communities about the dangers they face from natural disasters.

**T**he Indian Ocean tsunami that struck five years ago was one of the most powerful ever recorded. It killed 90,000 people and devastated villages from Sri Lanka to Sumatra. It seemed like an unforgettable tragedy.

Yet, it is normal for people to try and forget such painful events. Although it's healthy to want to move on with life, experts are worried that communities may ignore the lessons of the tsunami. That's why a group of scientists and artists has combined their talents to produce a 20-minute documentary titled *People Coral Mentawai*, about earthquake research around the Mentawai Islands of Indonesia.

## A new challenge

It is not every day that scientists and artists work together. This is mostly because of the nature of their jobs. Scientists rely mostly on experiments, figures and evidence – things that they can observe and calculate. On the other hand, artists generally prefer to rely on their instincts and emotions – things that can be felt but not seen.

However, two professors at Nanyang Technological University realised that such differences in approach would be a great help for this project. Professor Kerry Sieh, a geologist who heads NTU's Earth Observatory of Singapore, is one of the world's leading experts in earthquakes. Professor Isaac Kerlow of NTU's School of Art, Design and Media specialises in film and animation.

Professor Kerlow was quick to jump on board the project when he was approached by Professor Sieh. "When I give presentations on computer animations, it is not a life or death decision," he tells *What's Up*. "But, in this case, it is a great opportunity to impact people's



**EARTHQUAKE EXPERT** Kerry Sieh hunting for clues on the Mentawai Islands, in a scene from the DVD.

lives, to reach people who make decisions in Indonesia, so that will make it easier for people to escape in the case of a tsunami and make the city more resistant to calamities."

The main aim of the documentary is to educate people about the dangers of tsunamis and how to prepare themselves better for the next tsunami.

It follows

Professor Sieh and his research team as they collect coral samples from the Mentawai Islands. The coral samples help the scientists figure out how high the water level was when the tsunami occurred and when exactly it occurred.

The filmmakers used their talent to help communicate clearly to viewers. Although the scientists' work is extremely complex and detailed, the documentary breaks the ideas down to bite-sized pieces even children can



**PROFESSOR KERLOW** with kids of the Mentawai Islands.

understand. Originally in English, it's now being translated into Bahasa Indonesia so that Indonesians who do not speak English will be able to watch the documentary and learn from it.

## Painstaking process

For both the scientific research team and the film crew, the Mentawai Islands project meant long and tedious hours. They had to be up early in the morning, traveling by boat to look for their coral samples. Once the samples were found, it was not as simple as picking them up and sailing away. In fact, it often took Professor Sieh and his team one to two hours to cut just a single slab of coral. Larger corals took the entire day to be cut out entirely and

hoisted safely onto the boat.

Meanwhile, the six members of the film crew had to make sure they captured every single detail on camera.

The filming of *People Coral Mentawai* took almost three months, including a two-week expedition to the Mentawai Islands when the film crew and researchers stayed on a modified fishing boat. They stuck to their schedule regardless of the weather, traveling from island to island, interacting with survivors of the

tsunami.

The team's experience showed that although the work that artists and scientists do is vastly different, they share common traits such as patience, determination, perseverance and commitment to a cause.

They found the project so meaningful that Professor Sieh and Professor Kerlow can't wait to do it again. Their next film will look at the threat of volcanic eruptions in the region. Through animation as well as real life footage, it will relate the myth of the Princess who got buried under the Mayon Volcano in the Philippines.

– By SHEREEN NAAZ



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