

RESORT DEDICATES WEEK TO MAJESTIC MANTA RAY

CHERYL
CHEE-TSUTSUMI
HAWAII'S BACKYARD



Keller Laros credits manta rays with changing his life. During a vacation to Hawaii island in August 1985, he went on a manta ray dive for the first time. The guide led his group to a spot in Keauhou Bay where several mantas were feeding.

"They were huge — their wingspans were at least 10 feet, and they probably weighed 1,000 pounds — but their movements were so graceful, like an underwater ballet," Laros recalled. "I was blown away! Instead of pursuing law school, as I had originally intended, I decided to become a dive instructor."

On annual family vacations to Kona over the next five years, Laros reserved time for at least one manta dive and became more and more enthralled with them.

"We finally moved from Tiburon, Calif., to Kona in 1991," Laros said. "You could say I moved here for the mantas."

That year, Laros joined Jack's Diving Locker, the largest scuba diving education and retail facility on Hawaii Island, as an instructor. In 2001 he and his wife, Wendy, who holds a master's degree in education, established the Manta Pacific Research Foundation (MPRF, www.mantapacific.org), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that studies manta rays and provides educational programs about them.

Among other things, MPRF has identified 240 mantas in the Kona area via the unique spot patterns on their bellies; shared its findings with scholars such as Dr. Csilla Ari, a researcher at the University of South Florida's College

of Medicine, Molecular Pharmacology and Physiology, who is MPRF's lead researcher and a board member; and played a key role in 2009 legislation that prohibits the killing or capturing of mantas in state waters.

"Wendy and I do complimentary lectures for local schools and community events such as the annual Earth and Ocean Festival in Kona," Laros said. "I have been a presenter at numerous conferences; I'll be giving a lecture at the 25th annual International Congress on Coastal and Marine Tourism coming up in Kona in November."

Last August, MPRF partnered with Sheraton Kona Resort & Spa to create the Manta Learning Center, a 700-square-foot space near Paakai Point, an open-air venue at the hotel which is considered one of the best places in the world to see mantas from land.

Plaques with content written by Laros and Wendy accompany stunning photos of mantas by professional underwater photographer Bo Pardau. A 15-minute video that Laros created from various dives in Kona plays continuously on a large flat-screen TV. The center is open around the clock, and admission is free.

"The Manta Learning Center provides information about the manta's anatomy, life cycle and feeding, reproductive and behavioral patterns," Laros said. "It also introduces some of the mantas that have lived in Kona waters for a long time, such as Lefty, who has a floppy left cephalic fin, and Big Bertha, who measures about 12 feet from wing tip to

wing tip. Sheraton Kona is the perfect location for the center because its lights attract plankton, which, in turn, attracts the manta rays because plankton is their primary food source."

Sheraton Kona is hosting the inaugural Manta Ray Week to celebrate the first anniversary of the Manta Learning Center. Art, cultural and educational activities are planned to increase awareness about the magnificent mantas and raise funds for MPRF.

Highlights include an open house on Aug. 20, during which Laros will give three 15-minute talks and Wendy will oversee craft and manta identification activities.

Patrick Ching, a noted Hawaii marine life artist and children's book author, also will be on hand to paint manta rays for the very first time as visitors watch. Under his supervision, some attendees will have the opportunity to contribute to his three 2-by-3-foot paintings.

"Hawaii is one of the few places in the world where you can see mantas up close in their natural environment. I hope Manta Ray Week will increase public awareness of manta rays and inspire people to get involved with marine conservation efforts. Even the smallest effort can make a big difference," Laros said.

Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi is a Honolulu-based freelance writer whose travel features for the Star-Advertiser have won several Society of American Travel Writers awards.

IF YOU GO

Manta Ray Week

- >> **Place:** Sheraton Kona Resort & Spa, 78-128 Ehukai St., Kailua-Kona
- >> **Dates:** Aug. 16-22
- >> **Times:** Vary; see schedule
- >> **Admission:** Free
- >> **Phone:** 930-5151
- >> **Email:** sheratonkonaconciierge@sheraton.com
- >> **Website:** www.sheratonkona.com/manta-ray-week



COURTESY SHERATON KONA

Peggy Waterfall of Honu-Heart Designs Jewelry created these manta-themed earrings and necklaces, above. She will be donating the necklace pictured at bottom to Manta Ray Week's silent auction. It's 22-karat gold over sterling silver, retail value \$85.

HIGHLIGHTS

A free talk about manta rays will be held in the Manta Learning Center every evening at 6 p.m. (except for Aug. 20, when the open house is scheduled). Participants in the Manta Ray Instagram Contest must follow @sheratonkona on Instagram. By noon Aug. 22 they must post an original manta ray photo and use the hashtag #MantaRayWeek to tag the resort.

The winner will be selected randomly in a drawing and announced during the Aug. 22 event and on Sheraton Kona's Facebook and Instagram pages. He or she will receive a two-night stay at the resort, a \$100 gift certificate from Rays on the Bay and an autographed book by Patrick Ching.

AUG. 16

8 a.m. to 2 p.m., inner pool deck
Patrick Ching begins creating three manta ray paintings, which will be available for sale when they're completed. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to MPRF.

AUG. 17

8 a.m. to noon, inner pool deck
>> Ching continues painting 1 to 2 p.m.
>> T-shirt Splash Art children's activity. Cost: \$20 per child, including the T-shirt and supplies.

AUG. 18

6 to 8 p.m., Manta Learning Center
>> Exhibit of Ching's finished paintings and the unveiling of a plaque explaining the manta's significance in Hawaiian culture. A reception will follow with pupu (appetizers) and beverages available for purchase.

AUG. 19

6 to 10 p.m., Rays on the Bay
>> Performance by contemporary music artist LT Smooth
>> Manta-themed buffet and cocktail

AUG. 20

5:30 to 7 p.m.
>> Manta Learning Center open house

AUG. 21

9:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., inner pool deck
>> Craft fair and lei-making, ukulele and hula lessons 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
>> Performance by the Humble Project ukulele group

AUG. 22

6 to 8 p.m., Paakai Point
>> Silent auction to benefit MPRF
>> Presentations by Keller Laros and Roxanne Kapual-mohalaikalani Stewart, a science teacher at Ka Umeke Kaeo Public Charter School and a Hawaiian cultural specialist for Kai Palaoa, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the health, well-being and survival of Hawaii's oceans and marine life



COURTESY DOUG FARR

Keller Laros and Cousteau in Garden Eel Cove, north of Kona Airport. Cousteau is named after the late Jacques-Yves Cousteau, the explorer, scientist, author and filmmaker who opened the undersea world to humans and pioneered marine conservation.



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