

Australia's Lonergan Trial

learning how to count heads

The skipper of the dive boat *Outer Edge*, charged with manslaughter after leaving behind two American divers on Queensland's Great Barrier Reef, was found innocent by an Australian court. The missing pair went unnoticed until the crew found some of their belongings two days later.

The remains of the Americans, Tom and Eileen Lonergan of Baton Rouge, LA, have never been found, although a fin, BC, wetsuit hood, and tank belonging to the couple were found, and a slate washed ashore with a message in Eileen's handwriting with their names, address, and phone number, and a request for help because they had been abandoned.

During the trial, the defense argued that it was possible the couple had faked their deaths and feigned their disappearance.

A journalist attending the trial told *Undercurrent* that he visited the site of the Lonergan's disappearance and noted that the two-story tower of a day-boat mooring 2.3 nautical miles away could be seen from the surface of the water, leading to speculation about whether they would have swum toward it. Also, several other boats overnighted in the area, and their lights would have been visible. The weather was good and the seas were calm and flat, people reported.

The skipper of the charter boat *Quicksilver* told the court that he heard an American accent among his 288 supposedly Italian passengers during a dive trip to the same area the day after the Lonergans disappeared. He said

the boat count was three more at the end of the day, but he did not investigate.

During the trial, the defense presented nine witnesses who claimed they had seen the Lonergans in Queensland during the days following their disappearance. Because newspapers and television broadcasts carried photos of the couple, they were recognizable.

Some people theorized that the couple wanted to commit suicide. Six months before the couple vanished, Tom Lonergan wrote: "I feel as though my life is complete and I'm ready to die." Just 16 days before they disappeared, Eileen Lonergan wrote that her husband had a death wish.

The prosecution theorized that after being left at sea and surviving at least overnight, they succumbed to shark attacks. No one has heard from the couple

nor have their bank accounts been touched.

No matter what happened to the Lonergans, boat captain Jack Nairn said as a new owner of the boat, he accepted responsibility for leaving them behind, but he had delegated responsibility for diver safety to the experienced crew he inherited with the boat. He laid the blame for a failed head count at the feet of dive masters George Pyrihow and Kathy Traverso, who he said had told him all divers were accounted for.

Pyrihow claimed he had informed Nairn he could find only 24 of the 26 passengers during a head count after the final dive of the day and was told to add two swimmers who were in the water. Nairn denied any such conversation had taken place and said he would have ordered a recount if there were a discrepancy.

None of the three crew members could remember who was in charge of the diver's log book or who had done the head counts following the first two dives of the day. But all testified it was standard practice to assume a head count had been done if the

Was There Anyone on the Boat?

Everyone has things get away from them from time to time, but they're not supposed to include a dive operation's customers. According to a news report cited on Bahamasnet, four American divers diving with Stuart Cove's Dive South Ocean were rescued October 16 after spending almost 24 hours in the water when their 40-foot dive boat, *Stenella*, broke away from its mooring and drifted away. An initial air and U.S. Coast Guard search of the area near New Providence nabbed the boat and one diver, who was helicopter airlifted to safety. The remaining four spent the night in the water and were located after the search resumed at daybreak. All were pronounced "relatively healthy." The truth is that most of us have probably been diving while the boat was left unmanned. This, however, is a powerful example of why it's not a good idea. We tried to talk with Stuart Cove's Dive South Ocean about the incident, but they refused to return calls or e-mails. Perhaps they are just embarrassed.

boat's engines were started. They were, and the *Outer Edge* returned to shore without the Lonergans.

After the death of the two Americans — and most observers believe they did die at sea — the state of Queensland issued regulations for dive operations. They instruct operators on how to conduct head counts, maintain lookouts, and provide advice about the strenuous nature of diving and snorkeling and its potential to worsen existing medical conditions. In

the past four years, 13 scuba-diving deaths involving six tourists were recorded in Queensland. Twenty people have died snorkeling, all but two of them tourists. Unfit and elderly Westerners are more likely to die than Asian tourists.

Ironically, in September, two Japanese divers spent nearly five hours lost off the Great Barrier Reef after they became disoriented during a dive on Ribbon Reef, 150 km. northeast of Cairns. Unlike the Lonergans, these divers left their boat

behind. After being located on choppy seas by a rescue helicopter, the brother and sister pair were cold and shaken when they returned to their live-aboard, the *Reef Explorer*, the same boat that was in the news a year ago when passengers had to tie up a skipper who was trying to ground the boat on a reef. The woman hid her face and refused to make comments to reporters, because, according to Wayne Inglis, *Reef Explorer* spokesman, she believed she “lost face in making a mistake.”

Malaria in the Caribbean and Mantas in Hawaii

Undercurrent article about the manta rays in Kona (see the 9/99 issue of *Undercurrent*). While it is true that the number of manta sightings at the traditional dive site at the Kona Surf was down in the beginning of 1999, we have actually found other sites along the coast where the mantas are plentiful. The rays at these dive sites are the same rays we've seen at the Kona Surf. We are averaging 2-3 at the new location(s), which is the same average as at the Kona Surf over the last eight years. So in response to “Travel Tip: Hawaii: Where have all the Mantas Gone?” The mantas are still here. We've expanded our locations and the results are great!

Aloha Editor: I'm a dive guide in Kona, Hawaii. I did my first manta ray night dive in 1985, and since that time I've logged over 400 night dives with manta rays in Kona. My passion for these magnificent creatures inspired me to create a business called Manta Pacific (www.mantapacific.com), which is dedicated to the study and conservation of manta rays. I just read an

— Keller Laros

Dear Editor: After reading the article on malaria in Roatán in the Oct. '99 issue, I called and faxed the CDC. I was told that only the “rural” areas of both Honduras and Roatán have had malaria cases lately and not to worry about taking medication if I were going to a dive resort such as Anthony's Key. Do you stick by your story?

— eddiediver@aol.com

Editor's Comment: It is interesting that the CDC itself seems to be of two minds about Roatán's malaria risk and what travelers should do about it. The CDC representative who spoke with me confirmed malaria cases among tourists whose only recent travel had been to Roatán and voiced the CDC's official position as recommending malaria prophylaxis for any Roatán travelers. Apparently other CDC representatives feel that malaria prophylaxis is not necessary because Roatán malaria cases have been confined to “rural areas.” (Of course, all of Roatán is pretty rural, and I'd have a hard time defining where the “urban areas” start.) I'm not qualified to give medical advice, but if I were going to Roatán, I probably would not take chloroquine. However, I would be very cautious about avoiding mosquito bites by applying repellents liberally and avoiding dusk and dawn exposures, when the malaria-transmitting *Anopheles* mosquitoes feed. Evaluating malaria risk and comparing it to the cost of chloroquine in terms of money, hassle, and side effects is obviously an individual decision. *Undercurrent's* only hope is to provide you with information. You make the choices from there.

— John Q. Trigger