

# SDSU heads to Solomons for earthquake study

**Gary Robbins, San Diego Union-Tribune, 6-12-10**

Matthew Lauer, an anthropologist at San Diego State University, will head to the Solomon Islands on Sunday to continue studying the ecological and social impact of the magnitude 8.1 earthquake that hit that region on April 2007. The quake generated a tsunami, which in turn killed many of the 52 people who died during the incident.

Lauer sent us an email to describe what he'll do during his latest research trip to the Solomons:

On June 13th three students and I will be leaving for the Western Province, Solomon Islands. We will spend eight weeks conducting mapping exercises with villagers in 10 communities. We will be asking villagers to assess the ecological (both marine and terrestrial) impact caused by an 8.1 earthquake that struck on April 2, 2007.

The earthquake created a 10-meter high tsunami that caused significant damage in the Western Solomon Islands, which affected both human and ecological communities. In addition to the tsunami, the earthquake itself uplifted and in some places sank the landmass and adjacent marine habitats. This severely damaged some marine habitats that previously supported a productive fishery—the basic source of household protein and income for the indigenous communities of the region. The official death toll was 52 and several thousand displaced people. Luckily, the casualties were low because many villagers have traditional knowledge about earthquakes and tsunamis and fled to higher ground immediately after the earthquake.

The Solomon Islands are the third largest archipelago in the South Pacific and comprise over 900 islands, six of which constitute the bulk of the land area. The country is seven degrees south of the equator and about 1000 miles northeast of Australia. I have been working for the past nine years in the Western Province which includes many small islands collectively called the New Georgia Group. The region has several large lagoons and has some of the richest and most diverse marine ecosystems in the world. The islands are volcanic in origin steep with steep rugged interiors and many barrier islands and submerged reefs

Roughly 65,000 people inhabit the Western Province and speak 15 different languages. Rural communities are found mostly on the coast, and villages have populations ranging from several dozen to over a thousand individuals. Today, the economy of most of the Western Solomons is semi-subsistence. People live off the land and sea, generating cash by shell diving, marketing of local produce, handicrafts, copra production, and the operation of small stores, among other types of employment. Wage labor accounts for over one-quarter of household operating income, through direct employment or by remittances sent by relatives. Though some foods are imported (rice in particular), these people subsist primarily on local staples, with marine resources providing the bulk of the animal protein in their diets.