

Q&A with Ian G. Koblick, President and Chairman of Marine Resources Development Foundation providing the World's only Underwater Hotel and Underwater Habitats for Students and Marine Science Research



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“We need more people to understand that the ocean is our last resource for food, water, energy and medicine and we are destroying it.”- Ian G. Koblick

Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
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CEOCFO: Mr. Koblick, what is the idea behind Marine Resources Development Foundation?

Mr. Koblick: I founded it in 1970 when I was Special Assistant to the Governor of the Virgin Islands for undersea programs. It was to carry out marine scientific, undersea living programs. That was the original purpose of the foundation. Today we have expanded that to marine education because not enough grownups understood the importance of the ocean and I felt that we had to get to young people before they go off in their careers and make them understand how important the ocean is to our life and welfare living on earth.

CEOCFO: Why do you think the ocean has been overlooked by most people?

Mr. Koblick: Budget wise it has been totally overlooked. There has never been a thrust to explore the oceans. In the early 70s, there were many corporations looking to explore the oceans but there was no funding and that interest dried up and that is what encouraged me to start and educational aspect of our foundation. There is no economic return in spending hundreds of millions of dollars on marine biological research. Where there is money, there is exploration. When we first started diving, limits were 200 feet. Now with the oil exploration, they take people to 1000 plus feet. Oil in the ocean opened up a whole new field and that put money in oil excavation but biology, the science of the ocean, the coral reef and have ever received anything but college and university research and a little budget from NOAA.

CEOCFO: What is your foundation focusing on today?

Mr. Koblick: We do two major things. We happen to own and operate two of the three, in the world undersea, habitats. One is the MarineLab habitat, which has been in operation 1984 and it is the first time that students, non- scientific engineers and scientists could go under water and live and do marine science. That habitat still operates and we have student from all over the world that come and go through our marine science education programs. Additional, we own the Jules' Undersea Lodge, the world's only underwater hotel, which is a commercial operation, but it is owned by the foundation and it is in the same compound as our marine education facility. We have dormitory space for about one hundred students. We have over 4000 students a year that come and spend three to five days with us, learning about our marine environment and the ocean.

CEOCFO: Do people even know that exists?

Mr. Koblick: The underwater hotel is known around the world and has received hundreds of millions of dollars of media coverage over the last 30 years. It is called Jules' Undersea Lodge, (www.Jul.com). At our marine resources property in

the Key Largo we have our marine education facility on one side and on the other side, we have the Key Largo Undersea Park, which has both the habitats in our lagoon.

CEOCFO: *What has changed in research in the ocean?*

Mr. Koblick: Very little has changed. They finally figured out that the reefs around the world are dying, so there is a lot more interest in seeing why they are dying, not that we are going to be able to save them. In the last 40 years, 40-60 percent of the Caribbean reefs have died and it is going at a very rapid rate. In another ten years, there will be little or no coral reefs. The sponges and the soft corals are starting take over, but the hard corals that we were used to seeing, the brain corals and antler corals etc. are disappearing, almost gone and we do not know why. There is a whole series of reasons, some of it is 25 years ago, for some reason the entire sea urchin population disappeared and they were the cleaners of the reef. They are coming back now. We had a whole series of storms through the Caribbean that wiped out the big corals. We have had temperature change and physical chemical change. These have all contributed but coral is not adapting and coming back.

CEOCFO: *Are there particular technology changes that are making it easier to study the ocean? What are you able to look at today that you could not in the past?*

Mr. Koblick: Today we can map the bottom of the ocean, what is on the bottom of the ocean, we can send AUVs, (autonomous vehicles) down to do a survey on a computer grid all by themselves. We have equipment that can work in 10,000 feet of water and bring up cultural remains and do harvesting. It is an incredible time right now to look at what the cultural marine resources are and those are the sunken ships, the things that have gone down over thousands of years. Another corporation, a nonprofit foundation that I am the founding director of is called Aurora Trust Foundation, www.auroratrust.com, which we operated in Europe for twelve years, locating ancient Greek and Roman shipwrecks and mapping them for governments so that people would not come and fish over and tear them up or deposit spoils from onshore. We worked with the Governments of Croatia, Spain, Italy, Sicily, France.

CEOCFO: *How do you decide what to look at in your programs?*

Mr. Koblick: Our marine education programs are currently upgraded to try to bring the latest in teaching techniques and the latest in biological interest. For instance, in recent years, there has been a huge effort to reduce plastic in the ocean. We have a big program with plastic recovery and what it is doing to fish.

CEOCFO: *What do you need to operate in terms of funding?*

Mr. Koblick: For our educational program, a whole busload of kids will come to our facility from their school. The kids raise the funds to pay for the program and some school districts assist. Our programs are very inexpensive because the whole idea is to get as many people as possible to understand the importance of the ocean. One place that we could use some help is with our Sea Star program. That is a program to reach out to disadvantaged kids and have scholarships for them so they can come to the program. It is as important for the disadvantaged kids to become motivated and make something of their life as it is for the kids who can afford to. The disadvantaged kids do not get a chance to go on these field trips and we have tried to raise funds for that but it has not been very successful thus far. The program is on our web pages www.mrdf.org and on our MarineLab web page.

CEOCFO: *What is next for you? What would you like to do in the next few years that you are not doing now as far as programs?*

Mr. Koblick: I really enjoy and am very much involved in culture marine archeological. Finding what is on the bottom of the ocean that has been lost for centuries and then learning from what is recovered about the life and times of ancient civilizations. That is very exciting to me. We are involved in a number of places where we have great projects but we are trying to raise funds for them. That is my Aurora Trust foundation. www.auroratrust.com

CEOCFO: *Why pay attention to the organization? Why is it important for everyone?*

Mr. Koblick: Our total population's continuing health depends on us understanding the ocean and its processes. We have had over 200,000 students go through our program, many of whom have gone off to become scientists and teachers and they come back with their children over thirty years and say this is where it started. It is making an impact and it is having some impact but we need more. We need more people to understand that the ocean is our last resource for food, water, energy and medicine and we are destroying it.