

DAVIS EXPEDITION FUND

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT

Expedition/Project Title: Operation Wallecea

Travel Dates: 29th June to 28th August

Location: Buton island. South Sulawesi, Indonesia

Group Members: Robin Akhurst

Aims: To help, as a general volunteer, to collect data which would aid the establishment of a national park in the region protecting valuable environmental resources.

OUTCOME (not less than 300 words):-

During the summer I was involved in an ecologically based project out in the Indonesian rainforest. The project was run by Operation Wallecea and took place on the island of Buton, off the southern tip of Sulawesi. The trip was extremely successful, in many different aspects. I gained knowledge of the practical applications that ecology has to offer as well as gaining a valuable insight into the different cultures of the people of Sulawesi. It was extremely interesting discussing with them their views of conservation and the right way of going about it.

The first week was spent completing a forest acclimatisation course. This was meant to allow the volunteers to become acclimatised to the extreme climate. As well as this we were also taught essential jungle survival skills such as natural shelter making, map reading and how to recognise dangers in the jungle. Each night we were given a lecture by one of the local experts on a specific aspect of jungle ecology, these lectures often lead onto discussions with the locals and this proved essential in understanding their way of looking at the environment. After a fairly challenging week of trekking, lectures and constructing shelters we returned to Labunbo bundo where we were based.

After the forest acclimatisation, specific projects started up. I joined on the Buton Macaque project. This project involved a lot of observational work and as a general volunteer there was not much for me to do which the other members of the group couldn't. I did though gain some knowledge of behavioural patterns of the Buton Macaque, such as being able to observe the hierarchy system and how the troupe as a whole conducted crop raiding missions, which were very well planned out. At the end of the week I changed to a more hands on project, to help on the herpetology project.

My third week was spent assisting the herpetology project. This involved extensive ecological surveying in the Kakenauwe grid, around the pitfall traps located there. The pitfall traps played a fundamental part in Operation Wallacea's reptile research and is one of the most extensive networks of pitfall traps in Asia. The survey took place deep in the grid and so was one of the most physical demanding projects that I took part in whilst out in Sulawesi, although afterwards it actually felt like I had made a proper worthwhile contribution to the project and this I found very satisfying

On the fourth day of the herpetology project the group trekked out into base camp 2, to take a survey of amphibians along a stretch of river. This involved going out at night with head torches and looking for frogs by catching the reflections of their eyes in our torch beams. Once captured the frogs were tagged and recorded. The frogging expedition ended my weeks work with the herpetology team and concluded one of the most enjoyable projects I took part in.

The following week I joined the bats project. This involved setting up Harp traps in the jungle; these traps were designed for the capture of bats that were living in the jungle environment. We had to check the traps after dark and data tag and record the bat species that were found there as well as bringing the rarer species of bat back to the lab for a more detailed analysis. As well as forest bats, the group was interested in the more coastal associated bat. For this we erected mist nets across a river and as before tagged and recorded data for the bats that were caught. The amount of hands on work was greater on this project due to the processing and release techniques which required the bats to be let go from hand.

In conclusion Operation wallacea provided an opportunity to travel to the middle of a unique ecosystem (relatively new rainforest) and gain essential hands on knowledge that, due to the ecological nature of my course will be of great help to me when carrying out projects of my own, later on in university. The experience was great, it taught me other ways of analysing things, and most importantly to me it showed me a part of the world and different customs that otherwise I would never have experienced. As this trip would not have been possible without the Davis Expedition fund's generous support, I would like to thank you very much for allowing me to take part in this project.