JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT/CONFERENCE

Expedition/Project/ Conference Title: The Orangutan Tropical Peatland Project – Sabangau Forest, Central Kalimantan, Borneo

Travel Dates: 27th June – 22nd August

Location: Sebangau Forest, Central Kalimantan, Borneo

Group member(s): Sara Thornton

Aims: Volunteer as with the Forest Research and Ecological Monitoring Projects of the Orangutan Tropical Peatland Project (OuTrop)

OUTCOME (not less than 300 words):

Introduction

The Orangutan Tropical Peatland Project is based in the Sabangau Forest in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. It works to protect the vital habitat of the peat-swamp forest which is inhabited by several endangered and endemic species such as the impressive Bornean Orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*) and agile gibbons (*Hylobates albibarbis*). It carries out vital forestry and ecological research which is vital in understanding the forest structure and systems. The volunteer programme has been running since 2001 and is vital in collecting the quantities of data needed for effecting monitoring and conservation of the area. It furthermore provides employment and financial benefits for the local community – helping to replace illegal logging as the main source of income in the northern Sabangau Forest.

I was based for the seven weeks of my volunteer project at the Setia Alam Field Station. I helped with the collection of data in several different projects which allowed me to further my experience in ecological field work and learn new surveying techniques. Below I will shortly describe some of the surveys which I learnt and carried out in my 7 weeks of volunteering.

Photo 1: The Setia Alam Field Station

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

Camera Traps

I participated in changing the batteries of the camera traps set up on the permanent transect. We also collected the film of the photos taken, and these were examined when we got back to camp. The camera traps are vital in the felid research at the Sabangau forest, as the clouded leopards are extremely shy. They also aid in the research of the other mammals present in the forest, which allows a list of known flora and fauna to be made. The research has allowed confirmation that Sabangau supports four of the five Bornean cats including the clouded leopard, and the flat-headed and marbled cats. The photos taken allow population densities to be estimated which is vital to forming management strategies.

Butterfly surveys

We were surveying butterflies using banana baited traps in different areas to sample populations in both the forested area and the burnt area by the edge of the forest. This was done twice a day, and the caught butterflies were identified and marked. Re-captures were noted down. This provided data to compare the butterfly abundance and diversity of the disturbed burnt area to the forested area.

Photo 2: Holding a butterfly for measurements to be taken and identification

Orang-utan nest surveys

Nest surveys provide a method of estimating orang-utan numbers and densities. This is done by using a classification method to estimate the age of the nest. This can be very difficult to do accurately, but after a couple of nests you begin to get the hang of it! Once you do get the hang of it and start getting the classifications right (I was accompanied by an Indonesian who had done nest surveys for a couple of years, and he decided to quiz me whenever a nest was found), it proved to be a very rewarding experience. Another difficulty of these surveys was actually spotting the nests themselves – which are all very well camouflaged in the canopy of the forest.

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

Photo 3: First sighting of an orang-utan – Feb and her daughter Theo

Gibbon surveys

We did a couple of Gibbon follows, looking and making notes on their behaviour for as many hours as possible. This did involve getting up very early in the morning to find their sleeping tree, but gave us the opportunity to sit and watch the forest wake up in the early morning – a magical experience!
We furthermore practised triangulation which is a very useful method to allow for the estimation of home ranges and number of gibbon groups in an area. This involved getting up very early once more, before the gibbons woke up and sang, and three groups of observers were split up to three different sites in the forest. Once the gibbons began to sing, the groups can be counted from each site, and the bearings taken by each of the three observer groups. Then combining the bearings of all the observers, the location of the gibbon groups can be noted down. Using the method over a number of days allows the movement of the gibbon groups to be surveyed, and therefore their home ranges to be estimated.

Turtle surveys

To my surprise, turtles can be found in the canals of the forest. These canals were dug by loggers to aid in the transportation of logged trees during the time which the Sabangau did not have the current status of National Park. Saying this, illegal logging does still occur in the area and the canals are extremely detrimental to the forest as it drains the underlying peat. Special traps were set out in certain areas around the forest as well as in the burnt area. These were baited using chicken stomachs, and were checked twice a day. The turtles were marked with a number using tip-ex, and recaptures were marked down as well. This provides abundance data useful in the biodiversity research of the area.

Frog surveys

Frog surveys were started towards the end of the volunteer period, but nevertheless I was able to help on a number of the surveys. These were done in the night, once the sun had already set – which definitely added an extra element of adventure and excitement!
We walked on pre-determined transects and caught the frogs we came across (if we weren't successful in catching them, we would still mark down the frog seen and what species it was if we were able to determine this). When caught, they were weighed, and their body length measured. They were identified as well as possible, and photos were taken if the identification was not sure.

I personally found these surveys the most exciting, as I have always had an interest in amphibians. The forest in the night is also very exciting, as this is the time when you get to see the large spiders and occasional snake!

Other experiences

We had the opportunity to experience the near-by town of Palangka Raya. We had a long weekend here, and we were able to explore the markets and the streets. The people were very friendly and curious, and I certainly had some wonderful and different experiences to come home with! I personally felt very at home in Palangka Raya, and would love to return! We furthermore were able to go to the Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre at Nyaru Menteng. This allowed us to learn more about the difficult situation which the efforts of orang-utan conservation face, and it was a valuable experience.
Additionally, we spent 5 days at the Tanjung-Puting National Park. While this was a beautiful place, it was very different seeing the orang-utans here, which were rather domestic compared to those we had been used to seeing at Sabangau. We also had the amazing opportunity to see other types of wildlife such as false gharials and proboscis monkeys.

Conclusion

This was a truly life changing opportunity, and I have the James-Rennie Bequest to thank for it. Without the support I received it would not have been achievable. I will remember and carry these experiences with me for the rest of my life. It has also provided me with priceless experience which I will need in my future pursuits of a career in Ecology and Conservation, and has fuelled me to look into PhD opportunities once I graduate at the University of Edinburgh. I cannot thank the trustees of the James Rennie Bequest enough for their consideration and support.

Photo 4: The group after a day of measuring tree DBHs (Diameter at Breast Height) for the Forest Research project. I am top row, third to the right!