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ASPA / OA Travel Award - Borneo 2016

Travel report by Bertie Thomas and George Strainge

Bertie Thomas

Over the summer holidays, I went on a two week expedition to Sabah, Borneo, where I conducted research about the effect of climate change on the rainforest. The trip was organized by an institute in Oxford called Earthwatch and I was part of a team of 8 other like-minded sixth formers. Whilst in Borneo, we would be assisting scientists like Dr. Kogila Vani Annammala and Professor Rory Walsh (Professor of Geography at the University of Swansea) with their own research which focuses on erosion rates and sediment fingerprinting.

Whilst out in the field I learnt some very valuable fieldwork skills that I look forward to practising in the future but from the trip I also gained the satisfaction that I knew we were collecting vital data that will help us have a better understanding of the rainforest.

A typical day would involve us trekking into the rainforest and finding a site where we would conduct our research. To help us find these sites, we had research assistants who would trek into the rainforest with us, carrying equipment and using their expertise of the jungle to help us in the field. If we were doing Professor Walsh's research then we would be measuring tree

diameters along a transect to find the density and size of trees in a certain area, and if we were doing Dr. Annammala's research then we would be digging soil samples, or using erosion bridges and a laser to assess how much soil erosion had happened in a specific area. The data we collected would then be compiled and it would contribute to either of the individual's own research.

Our camp here was very basic but it was amazing because it gave a real experience of being in the jungle. There were no walls or doors and it just had a tin roof to protect us from the relentless rain. All we had to protect us from bugs and other animals was a mosquito net which we hung over our mattresses. Due to the lack of walls, we were often sharing the cabin with other inhabitants. We had 3 bats living under the shelf where we were sleeping and when it got dark they would come out and fly around the dorm. Another time, my friend woke to find a snake circled up between a beam and the roof just above him.

We were made to feel very at home at the camp and in the evening we would do activities like play badminton or football against the Malaysian research assistants. In the evening, we would also have lectures from some of the scientists who were also staying at the camp; this was really interesting because it really clarified what we were doing during the day collecting the results and why it was important

clarified what we were doing during the day collecting the results and why it was important.

Overall, the trip was just one of the most amazing experiences of my life where I made loads of great friends and I learnt a huge amount about how we need to look after our rainforests.

George Strainge

I would again like to thank both the OA Club and ASPA for their kind grant towards my trip to the Borneo Rainforest. It was the best trip that I have ever been on and was very interesting in relation to climate change issues and changing land use patterns. It was great to see that the research being done there is having a real impact on rainforest conservation laws and regulations.

After arriving in Kota Kinabalu and experiencing the feeling of a rapidly urbanizing city with its various sights, sounds and smells it wasn't long before we made our way to the Danum Field Centre. Here remains some of the most important primary rainforest in South-East Asia. At this site we got to grips with the use of soil research equipment including a soil erosion bridge, clinometer, soil core and densiometer under the supervision of recently appointed senior lecturer at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kogila Vani Annammala. On top of this Professor Rory Walsh of Swansea University gave us a detailed introduction to the research that we would be taking part in as well as taking my group for our first experience of a trek in the rainforest.

The feeling of being in the rainforest itself was almost surreal to me with the mass of noise and activity. This feeling was further enriched with the sighting of an orangutan which is a highlight of the trip that I can still vividly picture especially the great ape's shining copper brown fur.

On the morning of leaving the camp to head to our main site of stay in Malua we woke early to see a beautiful sun rise. At Malua the bulk of our fieldwork began with a well drilled routine getting us into the jungle to collect soil site samples and to measure tree density along a transect. Post more lectures from Dr Glenn Reynolds, Mikey O'Brien and Vani we further understood the importance of the research being done in relation to changing land use patterns and climate.

Activities such as playing football against the local Malua research assistants were great fun even though the result didn't go our way! Overall this was an unforgettable trip which I feel that I have developed from and built many new relationships with people I never knew prior to the trip.

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