

More than I dared hope for!

What can 15 inexperienced but highly motivated young people from so many different nationalities and cultural backgrounds do in such a remote part of Borneo during a mere 20 days? I have asked myself this question repeatedly before the start of the adventure.

How will they cope with the injustice they are to witness? How will they bond and be able to become a team? How will they communicate with the local people? What can they physically achieve with their presence? How are they going to connect to the millions of young people around the world and bring across what they experience and feel so everyone can see them as the eyes and ears for the next generation? So many questions... but also this gut feeling that yes there is potential in the Deforestation approach. An approach that was actually started by school students around the world - the eco-warriors are their representatives on the ground in Borneo.

Getting to know them bit-by-bit through the webinars, and learning about the special skills that each and every one of them brings to this untested endeavor strengthened my belief in these 15 eco-warriors. And now, after our three weeks together in Borneo I have to say, they did and achieved more than I had dared to hope!

Of course Cathy Henkel and her film team's presence and the drive of Microsoft and TakingItGlobal greatly contributed to enabling this adventure to start, but it truly was the work of these young environmentalists with their open minds and hearts full of passion that lead to what I dare to say are some of the most stunning results in such a short period of time I have ever witnessed in almost 32 years of working in Indonesia.

Let's look at some statistics first. Just dealing with the logistics of bringing the biggest ever expedition of foreigners to all those remote locations, some of which had never seen different colored people, is mind baffling. Without the support of the Sintang government, the local NGO's, the tribal leaders, the Kobus Foundation and most of all my most trusted right hand man Dudung, none of this would have been possible.

Travel: Jakarta-Pontianak by commercial airline directly followed by a grueling bus ride from Pontianak to Sintang travelling more than 400 kilometers inland. Then, hardly a day later starting the journey upriver in eleven speed boats travelling another 400 kilometers, changing to wooden boats from the already remote village of Kemangai, where there are no roads and the river is the only access, adding many hours of boat travel past the rapids to the most remote parts of the upper watershed of the Ambalau river to the small Dayak village of Duan. After stopping in Duan we rode small wooden boats further upriver for a jungle hike leading us towards spectacular waterfalls. On other journeys we used 4WD vehicles and motorbikes to reach villages like Tembak and Lansat Baru. Packed together on a small noisy wooden boat we traveled to Tertung, the sugar palm village. We walked many hours through pristine forests and still untouched swamps but also through endless oil and rubber plantations. In total the eco-warriors traveled more than 2000 kilometers on poor roads and difficult rivers in Borneo. That's more than 100 kilometers per day on average!

The 20 days were full of meetings: six meetings with large groups of local people in Kobus, two in Serawai, one in Begori, one in Tempeh, two in Kemangai, one in Duan, one in Tantong, two in Ensaid Panjang, one in Bukit Kelam, two in Tembak, and even one in

Pontianak. During those 18 meetings alone and along the way we spoke directly with more than 3000 local Dayak.

Then we held three meetings with the police, one dinner/meeting (jointly with police and forestry) with the army and five meetings with the ministry of Forestry. We had three meetings with the local parliament, amongst which included a two hour presentation in an open plenary session of the parliament. We had many interviews with journalists resulting in ten direct and indirect publications about the eco-warriors, the risks of oil palm, the potential of sugar palms, the wildlife trade and the need for environmental protection. We held one webinar with thousands of school students in the Asia Pacific region, created many blogs and wrote one article for wide distribution. We also gave two presentations in Catholic churches, one of which was during the Sunday prayers.

I held separate meetings with the local head of traditions for the entire Sintang region. There was one meeting with all the eco-warriors and the Bupati at the beginning of our journey, and another meeting between the Bupati and myself at the end of our visit. We met with the elders of the Uud Danum tribe, with the head of police and representatives of so many villages. We visited schools in Sintang and all of the eco-warriors lectured there. We played sport and games with young people everywhere. We participated in a total of eight traditional welcome receptions which involve the local ritual of stepping on eggs, stones, water and leaves. This represents the Dayak's welcome of us to their people, land, water and forest. Our traditional welcomes also included a lot of prayers, customary rice wine, and (sometimes very sad for the eco-warriors) animal sacrifice rites.

The eco-warriors slept on floors of simple dwellings in villages and in the longhouses of Kobus and Ensaïd Panjang. They swam in rivers with the local people, planted rice with the tribes, prepared food together with village wives and danced and sung with the local people at night. Everywhere they stole the hearts of the people, especially the children. They were named 'angels sent by God' in Kemangai, 'a gift from God' in Sintang, and named family of the Tembak and Ensaïd Panjang Dayak. They never complained and, albeit dealing with short nights on hard floors, were always prepared to take time for the villagers to tell them about their countries and to ask the Dayak about their culture. Together with their buddies of the English club they worked on their Bahasa Indonesia and together with the young Dayak activists they worked out plans to help the local people. I am just so proud of them!

Soon after the seriousness of the problems sank in they started working on solutions and formed natural groups for conservation, reforestation, education and the Earthwatchers group. They had emotionally difficult moments such as the suffering of local people and animals, and extremely uplifting ones like the wonder of being a member of a truly original and thriving long house community of the most hospitable and honest people imaginable. They learned about the complexity of the issues and that there is no single bullet to solve all problems. They saw oil palms and sugar palms on both ends of the extremes of bad and good. And they came up with plans for the next 80 days that I believe will bring even more results than they already achieved in these first 20 days!



What exactly did these young people achieve? First and foremost they brought hope for so many desperate people. They hugged Dayaks whose land on which they had worked so many years was marked to be bulldozed by oil palm companies because their village leaders said that they did not have land documents. They comforted a youngster who had been severely beaten by parties the Dayak say they know but I cannot mention here yet. Then, while unconscious, several motorbikes rode over him. They cried at the grave sites where they saw the bones of 7 generations and where the high priest explained that in mere weeks the bulldozers we saw being pushed up the river would flatten this site as they had done to other grave sites already like the one we saw half destroyed in Lalau Kento. All of the Dayak we visited asked the same. Please be our voice, please tell our story to the world! And the young Eco-warriors promised they would.

But more than hope, they actually achieved remarkable real things already. An analysis of the satellite data showed that the last vestige of remote forest to be sacrificed to the oil palms in the Serawai Ambalau region could not possibly be converted under the existing regulations because of the steep topography. Steve Patriarco measured peat depths and proved that the oil palms growing on land taken without permission from the local community in Ensaid Panjang were in fact planted on deep peat which has absolute protection status. This data has been shared with local NGO's that are now using them to formally put a stop to the trespassing companies.

In Tembak, located in the Tempunak region, they discussed the establishment of a new conservation project with the local people. And the night before they left Borneo... a pile of documents with official letters and signatures of EVERY adult of three villages was handed over to us! 65 hectares of virgin forest right next to the village had been given to us to protect forever and to be used for the new clinic and animal conservation center! And on top of that... thousands of hectares of still intact forest where we can release the rehabilitated wildlife! Jojo and 13 other orangutans we found will have a place where the local people will protect them! The Bupati in the meeting on the last day of our journey, supported the wish of the local people to make their forest into the first local land rights based animal conservation

forest! During our Ambalau trip we discovered sun bears, gibbons, hornbills and other wildlife and received tips about a smuggling ring for this protected wildlife. The Forestry office announced that they had no presence there but the police promised to follow up and confiscate the wildlife for the Ministry of Forestry and bring it to the Kobus Foundation until we can take care of them in the new Tempunak Animal Conservation Center.

The Ministry of Forestry in West Kalimantan, the head of the army and the head of the police announced that they would work together to stop illegal animal trade. The new army unit that will go out to the border region in October is getting special instruction on how to stop the smuggling of animals into Malaysia. The Police chief Lt. Col. Firly will build two new posts near known smuggling paths and add 15 more special police to intercept the smugglers! Together with KSDA the army, police and the eco-warriors will conduct a huge education campaign. And we started it already! 180 children of police and army staff came to the Kobus longhouse and became members of the Sintang Orangutan Conservation Club (SOCC)! One of the teachers in leaving after the visit whispered to me that she knew of another orangutan very nearby...! And she would send us an anonymous note.

The Bupati and the head of police, responding to our questions, both promised the eco-warriors directly to end all the issues with illegal wildlife and make Sintang into an example of environmental awareness for all of Indonesia. Both promised also to take formal steps against the misinformation campaign by some foreigners and false statements of some local NGO's about Sintang. Never before have I seen an autonomous district where all parties are willing to work together for the same cause like what is taking place here in Sintang!

The Parliament, after hearing and seeing the issues during the two hour presentation and discussion, announced that it would support an investigation by the corruption commission into the way several oil palm companies had obtained the land rights leading to so many conflicts between villages and even amongst family members. The many articles in the local newspapers really opened up the awareness that it may not yet be a totally lost case! The eco-warriors have already, truly given the Dayak a stronger voice!

The Islamic village of Tertung, where already 137 sugar palm tappers live off the products of the sugar palm, agreed to become the site of the pilot project. They also agreed to share their tapping know how with other tribes that already have hundreds of thousands of existing sugar palms but not the specialized know how on how to tap and utilize them. The Tertung village also offered us five acres of land that never suffers flooding and where we will set up a nursery for high quality, high producing sugar palm seedlings for which the Kobus Foundation will be the distributor. In addition they also offered at no cost a piece of land in the village for the construction of a village hub factory that will become the demonstration site for the entire Sintang district. These offers are now being formalized into official documents by the Tertung village heads as I write this. The head of traditions, Pak Abeng, visited the palm sugar factory of the Masarang Foundation in Tomohon while we were in the field in West Kalimantan and came back completely convinced and is now giving an enthusiastic endorsement to all his Dayak followers to start planting more sugar palms as a way to prevent the oil palm companies from obtaining their lands.

We witnessed the desperate actions of the Lansat Baru, Lansat Lama and Sibau villagers to preserve their ancestral forests by confiscating palm oil equipment and blocking the access road. They even found evidence of betrayal of the villagers by one of their own... Emily Hunter and Chai Chin wrote an article about their actions and the consequent arrest of the

Dayak chief that lead the protest. This article was sent everywhere and Chai Chin is investigating the responsible financial institutions behind the Wahana Plantation and Products company.



We held several meetings with a representative of the land office in Pontianak, Raphael Samsudin, who provided us with many data, facts, rules and regulations that the eco-warriors could use. He reported the eco-warrior mission to his superior who declared that he would immediately refuse any land permits if we could provide him with information on falsification of data to obtain the oil palm concessions. A task for the Earthwatchers!

And of course we rescued Jojo! A beautiful 2 and half year old little orangutan girl. Perry, veterinary paramedic, our resident veterinarian and orangutan technicians took good care of her. Ben Dessen and Liza Heavener, who together with Perry Schumacher make up the animal conservation group of the eco-warriors, took turns sleeping nearby Jojo's spacious dwelling and ensured a regular supply of her favorite termite nests and fresh leaves to make nests with. After Jojo realized that her new temporary home only had good people that did not tease her, she was given the parasite treatment, which caused her some discomfort and resulted in a range of intestinal parasites coming out. Soon after she was fit and happy, and we are now awaiting her blood test results. She will soon be joined by many other orangutans in need of rescue around Sintang. Even the bishop reported that he would bring in some orangutan babies from the very remote villages where the Catholic church is really the only trusted presence for the villagers.

Pak Aminudin, a lawyer, whose orangutan Pingki we rescued last year, has now set up the Pencinta Orangutan Sintang (POS) which we call in English the Sintang Orangutan Conservation Club. Already the club has some 540 children as members and when we can get the T-shirts together we have another 24.000 applicants!!! All from Sintang. All schools have agreed to participate in the new eco-warrior educational program that will be fully supported by the Ministry of Forestry, visiting all the schools in the 241 villages in the district. Mark

Kuroski, Kodi Twiner, Yvette Teesselink and Anne Sophie Marion have already started working on exiting interactive teaching modules. The children of the Sintang regency are ready for them!

On the last Friday we were invited to a live broadcast from the national Indonesian Radio (RRI) where we spoke about oil palm risks and the advantages of sugar palms, about animal trade and other environmental matters. People called in the live broadcast and send SMS messages. All the messages were supportive and enthusiastic about the eco-warriors, except one caller who said that all the problems in West Kalimantan were caused by the Dutch since Indonesia has only been a free country for the past 66 years. Fahrani skillfully asked the rhetorical question, "So if 66 years ago all the forest was still here, then who could have caused this misery?"

The all-male reforestation group consisting of Steve Patriarco, Paul Daley, Shadrack Kalasa and Tom Smith, have already started the inventory of suitable local tree species to plant. Arbainsyah, the botany expert from East Kalimantan, came over for a visit and taught us so much about the values of the forest and the species that hold potential. A Dutch student Tim van Gorkum, who is living and working in Tembak, will help set up the nursery in the period leading up to February 2012, using the seedlings already collected during this trip from various locations.



Together with chef Andre from Singapore we looked at the values of the original forest to create jungle food recipes, including an orangutan salad, consisting of leaves eaten in the wild by orangutans, and edible mushrooms and special gingers that only grow in virgin forest as vegetables. Another great potential is the Tengkwang jungle tree that provides healthier fats than the oil palm. We will bring in more seedlings of this dipterocarp jungle tree for the local people.

We also established contacts with environmentally aware rattan furniture manufacturers who are willing to process the rattan locally instead of bringing the raw material to Java, in this way creating local jobs and increasing the value of intact forests for sustainable rattan

harvesting. We also looked at resin producing Agathis trees for which we found a good wildling source as well as medicinal plants and native plants for coloring the woven pieces of the Dayak cloth.

In the village of Tembak, we looked at a very special spring that has the potential to replace all the plastic bottled water in the region! A sample is on its way to a laboratory in The Netherlands now. In the Ensaid Panjang village forest we looked at the potential of the small stream to generate electricity from a mini hydro project and how to make drinking water from that supply for the villagers without the use of fossil fuels. We donated a solar panel for the school in Tembak and a first infrared security camera for the Kobus Foundation facilities. We started making a database of objects that might be included in eco-tourism trips for foreigners. We instructed the production of a film documenting the production of the traditional Tengkwang cooking oil and one film on orangutans made by local youth which will already be finished in the coming weeks. The eco-warriors also cleaned up the garbage in Ensaid Panjang and built a simple garbage collection bin. They taught English to the children everywhere.

There is so much more actually, like the video of Mark Kuroski's song, and so many more small adventures, but I am sure you will read about all those other things in the blogs of our young eco-warriors. I just want to thank the eco-warriors and Cathy's team for agreeing to what sometimes has been a roller coaster ride of events and emotions and, of course, a very special thank you for making this dream come true. For indeed this can no longer just be called the orientation part of the one hundred days in the jungle of Borneo. The adventure has started and results are pouring in already! Really, all I can say is that it is "More than I dared hope for!"

Willie Smits,
On an airplane from Jakarta to Manado
2 October, 2011