

# Land Below the Wind

WORKING TOWARDS 'WIN-WIN'  
SOLUTIONS IN THE HEART OF SABAH.

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Learning to dance the Sumazau is not quite as hard as it seems. Men line up on one side of the village centre facing the women who are three metres away. After a few steps to the left and a few steps to the right, you slowly undulate your arms like a bird in flight. Everyone moves closer to the middle until all the men and women are in one line flapping their arms in a somewhat sensual manner. It is a good thing that the Sumazau dance is easy to pick up, because I am in the remote village of Terian in the state of Sabah on the island of Borneo, performing the Sumazau with several village women.

I have come to Terian as the Director of Seacology, the world's premier non-governmental organisation (NGO) with the sole purpose of preserving marine and terrestrial island environments throughout the globe. Seacology specialises in 'win-win' projects where islanders receive a critically needed benefit they request, in return for making an important sacrifice on behalf of the environment.

Seacology's methods are unusual in many ways. It has a staff of only five people and operates with little overhead and no red tape. To date, Seacology has helped preserve over 6,880 square kilometres of coral reef and other marine habitat, and an additional 275 square kilometres of island forest habitat. In the course of doing this, it has established 76 schools, community centres and other critically needed facilities.

With an area of 743 square kilometres, Borneo is the world's third largest island. Sabah is one of two Malaysian states located on Borneo. The author Agnes Newton Keith named Sabah 'The Land Below the Wind' because it is located below the typhoon belt and free from severe climatic disturbances. Sabah was once known as North Borneo; in 1963, Sabah, along with the neighbouring state of Sarawak, merged with the peninsular Malayan states to form the new nation of Malaysia.

Sabah's Crocker Range National Park, also called the 'Spine of Sabah,' overlaps with the traditional lands of dozens of forest-dwelling Kadazan-Dusun communities. The 200-person village of Terian is the first community to collaborate with the Crocker Range National Park to create an overall conservation plan. The PACOS (Partners of Community Organisations) Trust, an effective Sabah-based NGO, has worked with the village of Terian for many years. With the invaluable assistance of the Borneo Project and Green Empowerment, they approached Seacology to support the installation of a micro-hydro energy system to provide Terian with energy without having to rely on diesel fuel.

In a very real sense, this project would not have happened without the incredible on-the-ground efforts of Green Empowerment and the Borneo Project. In the words of Dr Felix Tongkul, the Chairman of PACOS, 'Terian is a seven-hour hike up

Opposite: Riverine birdlife is exquisite in Sabah.  
Right: The proboscis monkey is one of Sabah's best-known species.  
Bottom, left: Birds' eye view of Sabah's highland communities.  
Bottom, right: A warm greeting from the children of Terian.



and down steep mountains. The villagers are thrilled to no longer have to make this hike carrying heavy diesel fuel cans. With the micro-hydro generator, the village now sees the need to protect the water catchment area and the resources within. As a result, the owners of the land above the new generator have now signed a contract stating that they will no longer farm or develop four square kilometres of land.'

Accompanied by Dr Tongkul and the Executive Director of PACOS, Anne Lasimbang, donors and board members of Seacology have chartered helicopters to visit Terian and see firsthand the impact of the micro-hydro generator project. As the helicopters take off from a football pitch in Kota Kinabalu, the views are spectacular. The lush virgin rainforest is varying shades of green. Sadly, this is occasionally interrupted by areas of clear-cutting.

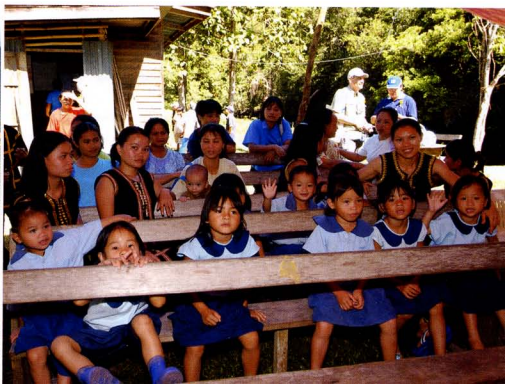
There is certainly no clear-cutting in the beautiful valley where Terian is located. As the helicopters land, we are greeted by the women and children of the village, who give us warm greetings and pin flowers on us. Mr Nousi Giun, a village leader, takes us to visit the generator. He explains, 'The village is very pleased to have such an inexpensive and nature-friendly source of energy.' Anne Lasimbang of PACOS adds, 'This

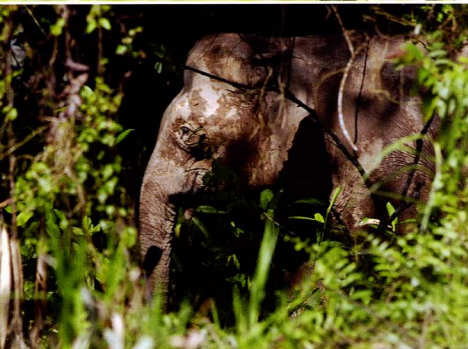
is a pilot project, a model for other villages who have already expressed interest in getting a micro-hydro generator.'

Upon visiting the generator, we note that it has an important second use. Simply by moving the main belt, it also serves as a grinder for rice flour. It is now back to the beautiful village centre for speeches, food and entertainment. Philip Lasimbang, the assemblyman who represents the local district, states, 'Seacology, the Borneo Project and Green Empowerment have brought comfort to the people of Terian. This micro-hydro is sustainable. It is forever.'

Seacology board member Kimo Campbell thanks the villagers for, 'doing the heavy lifting on behalf of the environment.' Campbell, who was raised on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, concludes his speech with the Hawaiian expression, '*I mua na po'e o na pu'u*,' which means 'forward the people of the hill.' Showing the unspoken bond that unites islanders throughout the world, the people of Terian are fascinated with Campbell's Hawaiian comments and ask him to repeat them over and over again.

After a feast of the delicious local food, it is time for dancing. Many members of the Seacology group join me in doing the Sumazau 'bird dance' with the Terian villagers. While our





Top: A heron basks in the afternoon light.

Above: The rare pygmy elephant makes an appearance.

as ideal nurseries for fish. Soon the broad estuary narrows and both sides of the bank are covered by banyan, fig and ironwood trees. As impressive as these trees are, they yield in majesty to the *mengar* (*Koompassia excelsa*), Sabah's tallest tree, which can grow to 65 metres.

Local legend has it that spirits live in these trees and ill fortune comes to those who cut them down. If this is true, there is more than enough bad fortune to go around. As lush and dense as the vegetation is, the rainforest is really only a narrow strip along the riverbanks, as massive clear-cutting has taken place to make room for palm oil plantations.

Yet near the riverbank, the rainforest is so lush that the trip upriver conjures up images from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. A few hours up the river and we hear the sound of breaking branches. Foraging near the riverbank is a herd of 12 Borneo Pygmy Elephants (*Elephas maximus borneensis*). While these elephants are not as large as their African counterparts, the term 'pygmy' seems like a bit of a stretch. Watching the elephants break off branches from trees and remove the leaves, it is hard to believe that these large creatures can have such precise and delicate control of their trunks. Perhaps this is because Borneo pygmy elephants have 30,000 muscles in their trunks alone!

As we continue up the river, we see all kinds of rare and exotic birds. We spot several kinds of hornbills, the most striking being the Rhinoceros Hornbill (*Buceros rhinoceros*), with a rhino-like orange horn resting on top of its large beak. Another beautiful bird we sight is the Asian Paradise Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*) with its long and elegant two-pronged white tail feathers. And for sheer size, the sighting of the very rare Lesser Adjutant Stork (*Leptoptilos javanicus*) wins the prize.

We overnight at the Sukau Rainforest Lodge, a true ecododge on the bank of the Kinabatangan River. There the lodge's Environmental Consultant, Jonathan Smith, tells me, 'Even though the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary has official status, there are still areas being developed. It is important to have ecododges and ecotourism which help protect the area.'

The next morning before we board the boat to continue our search for the orang utan, we spot a family of Silver Leaf Langurs (*Trachypitecus cristatus*) on a tree in front of our lodge. While the adults are dark grey, the babies are orange. As the boat gets under way we see large families of macaques, which are smaller grey monkeys. Some of the mothers are carrying very little babies. The dominant male protects his harem vigilantly and if any other males approach, he growls and bares his teeth, which is usually enough to frighten the trespasser away. After spotting a python, crocodile and several large monitor lizards, we sight a family of Proboscis Monkeys (*Nasalis larvatus*), a species found only on Borneo. As the name implies, the males have very large noses. Their upper bodies are orange. As they sit high up in the tree, one cannot help but notice their pot-bellied silhouettes.

Having been to many wildlife areas throughout the world, I cannot remember sighting more exotic animals within a

performance was undoubtedly not up to the usual standards of Terian, the villagers appreciate our willingness to join in.

Before the weather makes flying impossible, we board the helicopters and fly back to Kota Kinabalu. One part of our journey has ended, but another part is just beginning: our search for Orang Utans (*Pongo pygmaeus*).

Orang utans are the world's largest tree dwelling mammals. They also hold the distinction of being the world's largest vegetarian animal. Orang utans are the only one of the great apes found exclusively outside of Africa. In fact, they exist only on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo. In the local language, the word orang utan means 'man of the forest.' So it is off to the rainforest we go to search for these shy, noble creatures.

This part of our journey begins with a boat ride up Sabah's longest river, the Kinabatangan. The estuary is surrounded by mangrove trees; their splayed, elevated root systems serving

shorter period of time than I did on my travels by boat on the Kinabatangan River. This is truly a nature lover's paradise. Nonetheless, the 'wild man of Borneo' has so far managed to elude us. Time is growing short to spot an orang utan in the wild before we have to depart.

That afternoon on our last river cruise, Kimo Campbell shouts, 'Over there! I see something big and orange!' Seacology Fellow Pete Boyce points the way as the boat slowly edges to the riverbank. There, right on the shore, no more than seven metres in front of us, is an adult orang utan.

This great ape, which has over 95 percent of the same DNA as humans, is an awe-inspiring sight. A mature male such as the one we see can weigh up to 145 kilograms and have an arm span of about 2.5 metres. Perhaps the most striking feature is the extraordinarily large and flexible hands of the primates. Their strength and agility enable them to move through the rainforest gracefully.

As the *Lonely Planet* guide to Malaysia states, 'It was once said that an orang utan could swing from tree to tree from one side of Borneo to another. Sadly this is no longer the case.' Clearing of the rainforest for palm oil plantations is destroying vast swaths of Borneo's wildlife habitat.

Projects like the Seacology-sponsored Terian village micro-hydro generator in exchange for an agreement not to farm or develop land are an important step in the right direction. But they are only a first step. Policies must be changed to leave more of the rainforest intact if our children are to have a chance to see some of the animals I have just spotted in the wild. The up-close encounter with an adult orang utan has deeply moved every member of the Seacology group. We will do everything in our power to make sure this noble animal continues to have virgin rainforest to call home. ■



The morning light in Sabah.



#### Resources

- Borneo Project  
[www.borneoproject.org](http://www.borneoproject.org)
- Green Empowerment  
[www.greenempowerment.org](http://www.greenempowerment.org)
- PACOS Trust  
[www.sabah.net.my/PACOS](http://www.sabah.net.my/PACOS)
- Seacology  
[www.seacology.org](http://www.seacology.org)

**DUANE SILVERSTEIN** is Seacology's Executive Director. For 20 years prior to heading Seacology, he was the Executive Director of the Goldman Fund, one of California's largest philanthropic foundations. He also headed the Goldman Environmental Prize, which has been dubbed the 'Nobel Prize of the Environment' by *National Geographic* magazine and news media from many nations around the world. *The New York Times* has called Silverstein 'one of the world's leading island explorers' and he is a National Fellow of the Explorers Club.