

Rimba Raya Conservation: Not doing at all what I expected to be doing

This summer's internship was rife with good intentions, shoddy organizations, and a bubbling brew of changing expectations. All in all, it was a learning experience and for that I'm grateful.

Rimba Raya Conservation deals with carbon stock trading. Essentially, RR has conserved and protected a huge peat-swamp rainforest in Central Kalimantan province of Borneo, Indonesia. The idea is: this swamp/forest has been protected, which saves carbon, which allows RR to sell carbon stocks, which fund the project, ect. So while this project is environmentally driven, it is a for-profit business with a pretty huge profit margin. There is also local community development work that occurs around the area of the aforementioned peat swamp forest.

I was originally brought into the fold to help with some surveys: water quality, peat depth, biodiversity, ecological regimes. However, some priorities got moved around, some deadlines weren't met, and all of sudden there was this looming audit that had to be addressed. Thus, trekking in the swamps took a backseat to helping out as a managerial aid.

My responsibilities were pretty diverse. Because the local office in Pangkalan Bun had just gotten set-up, meaning we had a room in an already occupied house, such things as inventory, internet, and air conditioning were all things that occupied my time. Setting up softwares, debugging old printers (which were later scrapped) and finding tasty local places to eat were also priorities. After the initial flux of just getting an appropriate work-space in order, I began researching.

I researched a pretty wide variety of topics during my stay here, producing a number of executive summaries highlighting what I learned and its use to RR. The security of the forest has been and is an on-going issue so I was tasked with researching small aircraft, UAV's, GPS systems and camera systems. With the audit approaching in the non-too-distant future, I delved into an enormous vault of protocols, assessments, regulations, and standards that accompany carbon accounting.

I had two particularly rewarding research experiences. The first was looking into how to rehabilitate some denuded forests that had been illegally cleared by an adjacent palm-oil company. Learning about the tree diversity, soil regimes, impacts of clearcutting and canal digging fit well into my biology-perspective. Similarly, accounting for local peoples and customs, specifically in regard to traditional gardening techniques, was really interesting.

Second, and probably my greatest contribution, was my foray into the wide world of rural technologies. Part of the plan for RR is to help develop the communities who depend on the forest, the self-same forest we now protect. I began looking into solar lighting, clean cooking stoves, and rural water sanitation. Happily, I was able to talk with companies, manufacturers, and nonprofits as a bona fide representative of RR; I had conference calls, negotiated pricing, put together reports, and was fortunate enough to feel the direct impacts of my work. For example - the solar lanterns I recommended were bought and I was able to swing enough lanterns so one could be provided to each household that doesn't currently have electricity. As far as cooking stoves, I got everything set up (number, price, shipping) but regretfully had to pass the torch as my internship came to a close. So while I won't be here to witness it

personally, I feel good knowing that something I did expedited some of the aid to these villages and local communities.

I was lucky enough to get to go out into the field a number of times, interact with local communities, and get a closer look at the landscape (not to mention riding an elephant and wrestling with an orangutan). While these were amazing experiences, I think the bulk of my learning occurred in the office. Perhaps surprisingly, my learning was largely independent of the research I was doing. I largely learned how to better manage people and projects.

In Borneo there was an obvious language and cultural barrier. Communications were hampered both within the office (people using different programs, different formats) and expectations among all the various stakeholders and affiliated organizations was stifling at times. Just the simple act of making a conference call meant managing upwards of twelve or thirteen hours time difference, meaning waiting typically for an entire work-day for a response. Even just the pace and urgency of the project was often disputed or misunderstood. Although I can't necessarily quantify or tabulate this management experience, I can certainly say it was beneficial.

I think I like the idea of management, and I feel as though I know better how I would approach it. That is not to say that RR is badly managed - the local office is still in its infancy but had a lot of grown-up problems to address. Even so, I would have done things differently, an awareness of such I had never had cause to evaluate before this internship. While the internship was decidedly lacking in the rugged science I was looking forward to, it was no less educational and was perhaps more developing than it would have been otherwise.

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a possibility.