

Eco-tourism and Biophilia

by David Mahood

As disparate as the subjects of tourism and biophilia would seem, it is apparent that in my life and countless others, they are indeed closely connected. Biophilia is a term created by my environmental hero, Edward O. Wilson, to describe the innate affinity, fascination, and awe that we humans have for other species.

Judging from the rates that we visit our zoos and wildlife parks, it must be a common affliction. Yet today, many of us spend our vacations traveling to natural environments not knowing the effect tourism has on the habitats of the very species we set out to see.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Production and Consumption Tourism branch states that tourism impacts the environment in three main ways:

- depletion of natural resources
- pollution
- physical impacts

It also states that nature tourism is growing at an annual rate of 10-12% and that most of tourism's expansion is happening in the world's remaining natural areas. One can conclude that tourism has an impact on the future of all other species. I might add our own species to that list.

I saw firsthand the importance of reconciling tourism and biophilia recently during an excursion to Kalimantan (Indo-Borneo) at the conclusion of my consultancy on the island of Java, Indonesia. I stayed at an ecolodge called Samboja in East Kalimantan. It also happens to be the location of the Wanariset Orangutan Reintroduction Center and Samboja Lestari project founded by Dr. Willie Smits, who also founded the Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation in 1991.

Wanariset is the largest primate rehabilitation program in the world. To orangutans clinging to their last island home in a nation rampant with deforestation and illegal logging, it is a matter of survival of their species. And, at an estimated 30,000 left, orangutans are facing a crisis. Ecotourism is not common to this remote equatorial island but Samboja is a reason to believe that it can have a significant impact.

The lodge attracts naturalists from all over the world, from birdwatchers and hikers, to botanists and city dwellers. Many volunteer for weeks providing assistance with the many labor intensive tasks of the reforestation program. But all visitors to Samboja Lodge understand that they pay a premium to stay there and that their tourist dollars help provide funding for a seriously endangered fellow mammal, the closest genetic

match to humans in all of Asia.

The General Manager of the lodge, Jan Burrows, greeted his guests, including me, with the admonition, “go to bed early; turn your lights off at night, and be quiet. You are guests of the orangutans.” As I thought about those words, I realized that it seemed to me like good advice for all properties bordering natural habitats.

Samboja Lodge is about a one-hour drive from the main airport in Balikpapan, the capital city. The paved road ends several miles before Samboja, and the tropical setting is unmistakable as you near the Samboja Lestari compound. The ecolodge is built from local natural materials mostly, including its impressive roof from a local sugar palm fiber. Its structure is so nestled into the natural setting that it is barely visible from only a few meters away and sunlight drips slowly through the dense vegetation onto its facade.

Due to its tropical setting, the open dining and lounge areas offer unbelievable sights of a rain forest landscape. The 24 rooms all have abundant views of the immature jungle setting, which is the reforestation project, and all offer spectacular natural sightseeing. My room was luxurious with a king size bed and extended height ceilings that I shared with a gecko for the night. The bathroom was spare but efficient while the shower area was expansive, made of concrete, providing a rustic but pleasant shower experience. Water was to be spared as noted in a sign near the bathroom so I limited my showers to several minutes in total.

The premium tower rooms located above mine provided views of the six islands that host the orangutans in their various stages of rehabilitation. The observation tower, one level up from the rooms, peered slightly over the jungle canopy and offered stunning topical views but at a distance also revealed signs of forest clearing.

Kalimantan is irreversibly creating orangutan orphans by cutting teak, mahogany, ramin and meranti at illegal rates estimated as high as 75%. While most of the wood is cut and burned for fuel wood or for government sponsored palm oil plantations, some is sent to other nations, including China, and some ultimately is turned into furniture that ends up in homes and hospitality applications. No teak headboard from Kalimantan could ever be priced high enough to warrant exterminating orangutans from the wild. Any manufacturer that does not pay attention to its chain of supply may be complicit to the devastation of a habitat like that in the former Borneo.

Samboja is one of the few examples in Indonesia where native minds have realized the potential of ecotourism. My guide, Firdaus Yamani, of Borneo Discovery Tours, explained that ecotourism is as incomprehensible to the majority of the natives as is the

notion of irreplaceable biodiversity. He explained to me that much of the native population is engaged in illegal logging and that most are simply using or selling it as fuel wood. In fact, many Indonesians simply have no knowledge of the value of the wood that gets cut.

On my last day at the lodge I took an early morning guided hike through the jungles of Samboja. This excursion took me on a bridge between the tiny islands and brought me to an emotional confrontation with an orangutan that was on one of the islands designated for impending release. Her wide, curious eyes bespoke wisdom we could sense and her movements were most humanlike, as that of a young girl watching an intruder from the porch.

But this was no porch. This is the last island of her existence; her last hope; a final reminder for me of the importance of ecotourism to the few remaining natural places of the world. And while the island formerly known as Borneo is the third largest island in the world, orangutans only occupy a small portion of it and as solitary nomadic creatures, unoccupied space is essential to their survival.

Edward O. Wilson said in his autobiography, [Naturalist](#), “Earth, in the dazzling variety of its life, is still a little-known planet.” As we revisit some of the remaining biologically diverse and unchanged habitats of our little-known planet, we must support the interrelation of tourism and biophilia by supporting those ecotourism projects that have the most positive effect on the local habitat and its wondrous array of species. Moreover we must realize that our affinity for other species should directly influence how we build in these fragile environments. Thus, ecotourism can become a powerful ally in the preservation of our remaining natural habitats and in the growth of sustainable hospitality worldwide.

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