

The Indonesian Field Study Program

By Carissa Leeson

The Indonesian Field Study Program (IFSP), under the direction of Dr. Randy Kyes, gives undergraduate students a rare opportunity to experience the rigors and rewards of field research. Every summer since 1995, select groups of students from the University of Washington have joined students from Pusat Studi Satwa Primata/Institut Pertanian Bogor (PSSP/IBP), our sister institution in Bogor, Indonesia, for a three-week intensive field course on primate behavior and ecology. The course takes place on Tinjil Island, off the west coast of Java. Alumni of the program often describe their experience as nothing short of life-changing; I am lucky enough to be one of those alums, and I can vouch for just how remarkable the IFSP truly is.

In January 1998, Dr. Kyes gave a talk for the staff of the WaRPRC on his field study program on Tinjil. He showed slides of thatch-roofed huts and white sand beaches, of 10-inch centipedes and 12-foot pythons; he told stories of extreme heat, long jungle treks, and sharks sighted just off shore. Then and there I knew that I wanted to experience this exotic world for myself. The actual decision to go, however, was not lightly made; until that point, my life was happily dedicated to such Western luxuries as indoor plumbing, comfy mattresses, and toilet paper. There was something about doing this that was so out of character that it became hopelessly compelling, and I decided this was the way I was going to test my mettle.

Two years later, once I had research experience under my belt and money in the bank, I applied to the program and was chosen to join the 2000 class along with seven other UW students. Before leaving the States, we all had to take a quarter-long seminar course on Indonesian language and

history and formulate our individual research projects to be conducted on the island. Thus prepared, we left for Jakarta on the 28th of June.

From the very beginning, the trip was nothing short of spectacular. We spent the first three days in Bogor, getting acclimatized to the tropical weather, purchasing supplies, and shaking off jet lag from the 18-hour flight. We explored the city and found ourselves repeatedly invited into people's homes for tea and conversation. Everyone was patient with our broken Bahasa Indonesia (the official language) and our hurried flipping



Carissa Leeson and friend

through our Indonesian dictionaries. Each successful attempt at communication added to our sense of accomplishment, and it seemed that our efforts to speak the local tongue, though often humorous, were appreciated. These experiences also made me feel intensely grateful for the opportunities that we American students often take for granted. We met a young woman who was studying English at a local university, and when we explained that we were there to study monyet-monyet (monkeys), she launched into a line of questioning about Darwinism. She soon revealed that she wished to study psychology, but could not afford to attend the school in Jakarta, one of only a handful of institutions in Indonesia where the subject is offered. I vowed never again to be flippant about the educational opportunities offered to me.

While we were saddened to

leave the warm, friendly people we had just met, we were extremely eager to get to Tinjil. On the morning of the fourth day we met up with our fellow students from PSSP/IPB and together we set off for the coast. This leg of the trip involved a grueling five-hour ride at breakneck speeds over nauseatingly curvy, single-lane mountain roads to Muarabinuangan, on the western coast of Java. After spending the night at the base camp there, we had only an hour-long boat ride out to the island. You'd think this would be an enjoyable prospect, but we had the questionable honor of surviving the roughest seas

encountered by any group since the IFSP program began six years ago. The waves reached 12 feet and tossed our little boat, the Primata, in a most distressing way. But if any of us wondered why we had

dragged ourselves halfway around the world only to be drowned in the Indian Ocean, all became clear the moment Tinjil came into view: lush green forest and shimmering white sand, all surrounded by the most turquoise water I have ever laid eyes on. We had arrived.

The entire group of UW students leaped off the Primata immediately, finding both the lure of the water and the joy of getting off the boat irresistible. We swam to shore, and there was no doubt in our minds what to do next: we urgently wanted to see our first monkeys in the wild. Donning cargo pants and bug spray, we headed directly into the forest in search of long-tailed macaques (*Macaca fascicularis*). Soon we found ourselves surrounded by huge trees with tremendous roots, forest crabs, vines that appeared to drop down from heaven. Then we heard the monkeys. Search-

ing the upper canopy frantically with our binoculars and zoom lenses, we soon realized that the calls were coming from all around us. We were surrounded, and on their turf. Having heard stories from Dr. Kyes about being attacked by large males, we were, needless to say, somewhat anxious. But the macaques soon leaped away, and we discovered in ourselves a profound realization of what it is to be the uninvited guests.

Life on Tinjil quickly took on a daily routine:

5:30am Wake up, put on jungle gear; shake giant spiders out of pants.

6:00am Breakfast. My favorites: nasi goreng (fried rice) and mi (noodles in broth). All our meals were lovingly prepared by the island's wonderful cooks, Bu Echi and Bu Towia. ("Bu" is the formal address for an adult woman; it is short for Ibu, meaning "mother.")

6:30am Begin data collection (my project was to survey the island's macaque population): walk length of island and return.

11:30am Drag exhausted body back to camp; remove boots to the great joy of aching feet.

Noon Lunch

12:30 Free time: study for class, write up data, swim to cool off, write letters home, explore the island.

6:00pm Dinner. All meals included nasi putih (white rice); we often had tofu, tempe, ikan (fish), chicken or goat sate, various vegetable dishes made with cucumber, bean sprouts, and all kinds of luscious, unidentifiable greens. If we were lucky, the Bu's would prepare ayam goreng (fried chicken), much to the delight of our American stomachs.

7:00pm Class: a nightly lecture on Primate Behavior and Ecology by Dr. Kyes.

8:00pm Write in journal (a requirement of the course); hang out with the other students;

get the occasional "krok," a traditional form of Indonesian medicine in which the edge of a coin covered with tiger balm is scraped down the back until blood vessels break. Krok is often accompanied by a piget (massage).

9:00pm Collapse from exhaustion; sleep on the beach, under the stars, rain or shine. (It should be noted that this was in no way a requirement; we all had cabins, but the cool breeze and the sound of the waves crashing on shore kept a group of us coming out there every night.)

But though the days proceeded

demics, pop culture, slang—we were all curious about each other's cultures, and evenings were often filled with a rich exchange.

The time went by all too quickly. On the last night the American and Indonesian students, all friends now, gathered around a bonfire to laugh, dance, and revel in the joy of the time we had spent together. The conversations lasted into the night, and many of the students hardly slept at all. My roommate and I woke up to greet the sunrise, to say our final farewell to the island. We sat together quietly, taking in the glorious shades of pink and orange, reviewing what the time there had meant to each of us. I cannot speak for her, but for me, it was simple: this high-maintenance city girl had gone to the jungle and



From left to right: R. Tito Sutriantio, Anna Pombo, Katie Hinde, Carissa Leeson, and Usman

according to a certain routine, there was no such thing as an "average" day on Tinjil. Every day brought with it something entirely new. Many of these experiences came after our evening class, when we were left to our own devices. There were nights when we would all partake in the hunt for and consuming of yu-yus, the island's nocturnal forest crabs. The Indonesian students were kind enough to show us the appropriate way to pound the shells open to get to the delicious meat inside. Other nights we would roast corn and marshmallows (which the Indonesian students pronounced "too sweet"), or join in group games of cards or dominoes. One evening a group of us stayed in the classroom and gave each other lessons on the history of our two countries; some evenings we spent hours discussing politics, superstitions, religion, aca-

joyfully survived the heat, the insects, the long treks, and, most impressively, the "squatters" (as we affectionately called the toilets). I had learned a new language and made life-long friends, people who would be my future colleagues. I learned about another culture and gained a profound respect for its intricacies. Finally, I fell in love with learning about the animals in their natural habitat, and came to appreciate the hard work and dedication involved in studying them in this way.

Many thanks to everyone at PSSP, especially Dr. Dondin Sajuthi, Director, and very special thanks to Entang Iskandar, MS, Program Coordinator, for all the gracious and invaluable support.

For more information about the program, visit the IFSP website: <http://www.rprc.washington.edu/ifsp/>