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DOI Technical Experts in the Asia Pacific

DOI-ITAP

Voices From the Field

Interview with Mark Flora, former National Park Service - Water Resources Division Strengthening Indonesia's National Park Management and Wildlife Protection, 2015-2017



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Context in Indonesia: Indonesia is one of the most biodiverse countries on earth, and the Central Kalimantan Province on the island of Borneo is home to several protected habitats. These include peatland ecosystems, which provide the right environmental conditions for a variety of rare plant species as well as globally recognized primate species such as the Orangutan. Unfortunately, due to decades of logging activities, the water level of the peatlands has been significantly reduced, resulting in wildfire prone dry peat. Recently established protected areas in this region now face the challenges of restoring the water level to its original state and conserving endangered species.

DOI-ITAP ASSIGNMENT: Mark Flora has traveled to Indonesia on several occasions to lead technical teams providing assistance under *Strengthening Indonesia's National Park Management and Wildlife Protection*, a DOI-ITAP program funded by USAID Indonesia. Mark served as an expert in the areas of hydrology and inventory & monitoring.

What was your role in this project?

My role in the project was to strengthen Indonesian protected areas' natural resource management capacity. Our purpose in traveling to Sabangau National Park was to provide training in hydrological techniques providing park staff with knowledge to better cooperate with on-going efforts dredging to restore water levels within impacted areas of the park. Our team ultimately co-authored an assessment of the park's hydrological environment. I was subsequently asked to lead a team traveling to Indonesia to strengthen wildlife Inventory and Monitoring (I&M) capabilities of both Sebangau and Tanjung Putting National Parks. This workshop focused on field implementation techniques. I am now working with a team in developing an advanced I&M workshop focusing more deeply on data management and the use of data in administrative decision making.

How was your experience during preparation for this assignment?

I received tremendous support from Project Manager Jason Riley in identifying and selecting team members. He was extremely well organized in providing the intent of assignment and communicating our vision to the Ministry of Environment and Forestry in Jakarta. I also received great support from the ITAP travel and administration team as well as ITAP's In Country Coordinator Enis Widjanarti. For future assignments, I would recommend to technical teams that they need to allow preparation time to identify and review previous work that has been done by researchers, governmental agencies, NGOs and others during their pre-trip preparation. These sources can provide valuable context for the assignment.

Describe your most rewarding experience during your participation in the Indonesia Sister Protected Area program?

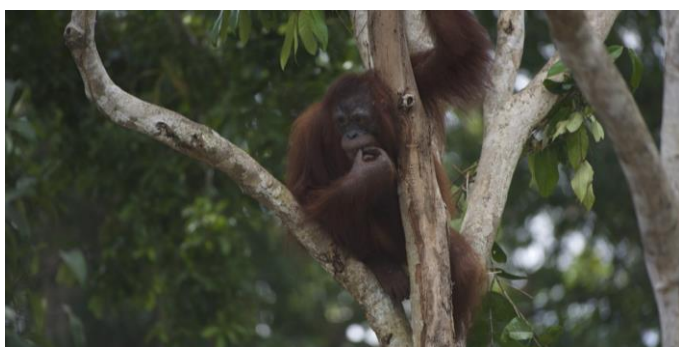
By far the most rewarding experience has always been the people, and this is true for the international assignments I have participated in with ITAP. Despite the fact that our homes are 11 time zones apart, our hearts, and those of our Indonesian partners, are in the same place. To me the opportunity to get to know our Indonesian colleagues on a 1:1 basis has been the most rewarding experience. Workshops are typically conducted half in the field and half in classroom. Sitting by the campfire in the jungle gives you an opportunity to get to know your colleagues and their interests. It helps create opportunities for future engagements. Our two Sister Protected Areas agreements are a perfect example. We have had an Eco-tourism / Special Programs Ranger from Tanjung Puting spend three months on detail at Big Cypress NP as well as an Extension Officer / Interpretive Ranger from Sebangau NP spend a one month detail in Great Dismal Swamp NWR. By getting to know them, you get to identify the right people for these activities. Such interactions serve as a matchmaking tool for these engagements.

What was the impact of this experience at your professional and personal level?

During my long career, I honestly thought that international work made me a better resource manager. I could see how other countries addressed similar problems, and this made me better prepared professionally. Since I retired, I felt like I needed to give back. I want to make sure that these young professionals are gaining something from these assignments, and that our partners are as well. I think the difference in this assignment has been observing what can be done in the role of wetlands restoration. I had a chance to see some of the several dams WWF Germany has built in Sebangau NP to restore the natural water level. I had read about it in my career, but I got to see it on the ground for the first time. An ITAP assignment can really teach this “old dog” new tricks!!!

What would you tell someone considering participating in a DOI- ITAP assignment?

I strongly encourage it as an opportunity for professional improvement. If you put on blinders and don't push your boundaries, you will never improve. Never stop learning or broadening yourself. My biggest regret in my career was focusing too much on NPS. I had no idea what BLM or FWS were doing until I worked on an ITAP assignment. Interacting with other bureau colleagues will make you a better employee. I guarantee that once you come back, you will feel energized to do better. Another thing to remember is that you are a guest in their country, and we have to understand that we do things differently, and that there isn't a good or bad way of doing something. All we can do is bring ideas to consider. It's always important to be culturally aware and resource aware.



Peatlands in Central Kalimantan have been dried out by decades of logging activities. Dry peat creates conditions for wildfires that emit high levels of CO2. This region is also home to biodiverse habitats that contain world renowned species such as the Orangutan. DOI-ITAP has worked with protected areas in this region to strengthen their capacity to address these resource management challenges. The project is funded by the USAID Indonesia. Left: Orangutan, commonly sighted in protected areas of Central Kalimantan, Indonesia. Right: Staff at Sebangau National Park in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, working in the field (Photos by Jared Underwood and Mark Flora)

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