

RANGER

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Sharing skills and experiences

by supporting Indonesia's national parks

By Mark D. Flora



Erwin Siregar of USAID LESTARI and Rio Ardi of the Orangutan Information Centre discuss wetland restoration with NPS hydrologist Peter Sharpe in Rawa Singkil Wildlife Reserve.

During my 30-year National Park Service career, it was a privilege to work with truly exceptional colleagues dedicated to preserving and protecting America's greatest places. Following retirement, my journey has continued internationally.

I now volunteer with the U.S. Department of the Interior's International Technical Assistance Program (DOI-ITAP). For those fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to work internationally, it soon becomes apparent that no matter where you are in the world a ranger is a ranger. While our homes may be separated by 11 time zones and many of the challenges vary, our hearts are in the same place – striving to protect nature the very best that we can.

Extending for more than 3,000 miles along the western rim of the Pacific Ocean's Ring of Fire, Indonesia is an archipelago consisting of more than 13,000 geologically active islands spanning both sides of the equator. The unique biogeographical history of this region, influenced by its proximity to both the African and Asian land masses, has resulted in an extremely

rich biodiversity second only to that of the Amazon region of Brazil.

To help preserve its significant resources, Indonesia has established 53 distinctive national parks and other protected areas. Unfortunately, the integrity of the resources of many of these areas has been degraded. Despite their protected status, these treasures remain under severe threat from a wide variety of adjacent land use activities. Forest loss and habitat fragmentation, land conversion to oil palm and pulp wood plantations, illegal hunting and wildlife trafficking, mining and inadequate environmental protection are prevalent.

Since 2013, the DOI-ITAP has collaborated with the Republic of Indonesia's Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MOEF) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to strengthen Indonesia's protected area management capabilities through capacity building and skill set enhancement-focused project activities. These include field and classroom-based training, on-site assessments of specific management challenges, professional development details within U.S. protected areas, and other technical assistance activities.

A cornerstone of the Indonesia Parks Program has been the development of two Sister Park/Protected Area partnerships between Tanjung Puting and Sebangau National Parks in Borneo's Central Kalimantan Province and Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia and Big Cypress National Preserve in Florida.

Projects within these sister parks have included:

- **Wildlife conservation**
- **Sustainable tourism and visitor services management**
- **Species inventory and monitoring**
- **Hydrological monitoring**
- **Peatland management and wetlands restoration**
- **Park interpretation and environmental education**

Recently, the program has expanded to also support protected areas managed by the Natural Resources Conservation Agency in Aceh, Sumatra and Papua provinces, and marine protected area planning and management activities in North Maluku, Maluku and West Papua provinces.

Photos courtesy of DOI-ITAP

TANJUNG PUTING NATIONAL PARK AND BIG CYPRESS NATIONAL PRESERVE

Tanjung Puting was first established as a wildlife reserve in 1936 by the Dutch colonial government for the protection of the Bornean orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*) and proboscis monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*). In 1996 it was designated as a national park by the Republic of Indonesia.

The Indonesian park and Big Cypress are both protected wetlands vital to larger regional watersheds that contain critical habitat supporting a rich biodiversity. Both areas also face a complex array of external management issues. These issues include:

- Increasing developmental pressures on their peripheries
- External pressures fragmenting the habitats of critical wildlife species
- Increased local and international visitation
- The need to work cooperatively with local jurisdictions and partners in order to effectively manage their resources

DOI-ITAP technical assistance to Tanjung Puting has included in-country training workshops and assessments focusing on park education and interpretive planning, ecotourism and concessions management, and wildlife inventory and monitoring techniques. In addition, Big Cypress hosted a 10-week detail for a Tanjung Puting ranger. The ranger received hands-on experience working in visitor services and welcome center management, commercial operations management, environmental education and natural resources management.

The detail provided the ranger with the experience needed to initiate longer-term activities designed to improve visitor experience, including carrying capacity assessment and ranger-led programs, and improve commercial service management relating to boat tour operators. The ranger also received training and skills to work with other Tanjung Puting staff to improve interpretive materials, youth outreach curriculum and media relations.

SEBANGAU NATIONAL PARK AND GREAT DISMAL SWAMP NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Sebangau National Park encompasses a significant part of the largest remaining

continuous area of dense peat swamp on the island of Borneo. It serves as important habitat for many globally recognized threatened and endangered species. These include three high-profile primate species: the Bornean orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*), the agile gibbon (*Hylobates albibarbis*), and the proboscis monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*).

The Sebangau peat swamp forest was managed as a production forest from 1970-1995. During the period, logging companies gained access to the forest through the construction of temporary railways. Following the expiration of the logging concessions was a period of rampant and uncontrolled illegal logging activities (1995-2004). Illegal loggers created an extensive network of shallow canals, for floating the logs into adjacent rivers. The canals were dug in swampy peat.

The unregulated logging and canals resulted in the severe disruption of the natural hydrology. The water table fell and the peat dried out, greatly increasing fire vulnerability and contributing to the degradation of the forested peat swamp environment.

Since the national park was created in 2004, a major focus of park management and NGO partners has been wetlands restoration and re-establishing natural hydrologic conditions. Sharing similar hydrological impacts and restoration needs, Sebangau was paired as a sister park with Great Dismal Swamp.

WHAT WE GAIN

DOI-ITAP technical assistance to Sebangau has included the completion of a water resources assessment for the park in 2015 and providing park staff with specialized workshops. The workshops focus on the hydrology of tropical peat forests and peatland restoration and management.

A Sebangau resource management specialist and outreach-environmental education specialist have each completed eight-week details at Great Dismal Swamp. Skill sets honed during these details have allowed the Indonesian rangers to gain sufficient experience to serve as trainers and subject matter experts for Sebangau and to extend their expertise to other protected areas in Indonesia. The rangers recently helped lead a wetlands restoration workshop for rangers from Rawa Singkil Wildlife Reserve in Aceh.


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Additional DOI-ITAP assistance to Sebangau has included ecotourism-focused training. The team provided guidance about how new infrastructure can support tourism. Examples include boats for hire, boardwalk trails, interpretive signage and construction of a pavilion for hosting group activities. Additional training focused on interpretation, environmental education and outreach activities.

WHAT WE GAIN IN RETURN

For me, interaction with my international peers has been the highlight of my overseas experiences. During my NPS career, international assignments made me a better resource manager. Recognizing that I was a guest in another country, I gained a better appreciation for how others might approach a similar park operations or resource management issue.

Many of my international peers had far fewer resources than might be available to me. I was humbled by the observation that being a good ranger was often more dependent upon skills achieved through experience than resources. Also noted was that while much could be learned from classroom and field activities, sometimes the most important insights are gained during off hours around the campfire.

I strongly encourage anyone who is considering participating in a DOI-ITAP assignment to go for it. You will have a unique opportunity for professional development, challenging you to expand your boundaries and broaden your understanding. You will also return home with new friends and a very good feeling about the work rangers do in their home parks, worldwide. 

Mark D. Flora has been a senior technical advisor for the U.S. Department of Interior's International Technical Assistance Program and is retired from the National Park Service Water Resources Division. Visit www.doi.gov/intl/itap to learn more.