



In March this year, Tara Hunt travelled from Sydney to north Sumatra to take part in our fundraising trek in the Gunung Leuser National Park. Tara recently spoke with my colleague, Christiana Stergion. I really want to share more about what they discussed because it demonstrates so clearly just why it's so important to protect this special rainforest and its critically endangered orangutans.

Kelvin

CS: Tara, what led to you and your friend Jen going on the Rainforest Rescue fundraising trek to Sumatra?

Tara: Jen and I saw the film "Burning Season", which is a documentary about the destruction of Indonesian rainforests. Jen's very concerned about palm oil and the plight of the orangutans. She went online after we saw the film and found this trek.

I'd heard of Rainforest Rescue and I rang and spoke to Kelvin, the CEO. It was great to learn more about the tropical rainforest projects that Rainforest Rescue is supporting in Indonesia. So, we decided to do the trek.

CS: You arrived in Medan and then travelled to the edge of Gunung Leuser National Park to begin the trek, what was the national park like?

Tara: We started at a gorgeous Indonesian village on the edge of the park. It has a beautiful river running through it and a lovely suspended bridge that we walked across. We stayed in an eco-lodge there. It is far away from the hustle and bustle of the huge city of Medan, and a lot of the locals seem very happy there. They are lovely, friendly people, and the town is unspoilt. It was really refreshing to go there after Medan.

CS: You saw orangutans up close on the first afternoon of your trek. What was that like?

Tara: Yes, that first afternoon we went to a viewing platform, which is an hour's trek up a hill that is part of the Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre there. We all watched as some of the orangutans came near us at the viewing platform. It was fabulous to see them up so close and we spent a couple of hours there.

We were lucky because while you're trekking, you're not actually going to come across that many animals as they're scared of you. You know they're there, and you can see them every now and then in the distance, through the trees. But at the viewing platform, it was a great opportunity to see them up close.

They are a big ape, and I must say they were fascinating. We saw a mother and baby and then we saw another orangutan who had been in the rehabilitation centre. I think she was released back into the wild a year or so ago. We found out after we got back to Australia that she was actually pregnant and she had a baby a week later.

CS: Could you tell me a little more about what you experienced as you walked through the national park?

Tara: The jungle seems to start so suddenly. In fact, when we were coming out of the jungle at the end, it just stopped: bang.

None of us had any idea where we were going, but the guides were fantastic, and they would point out lots of interesting things as we walked along. We learnt a lot through the guides on the trek about the plant species and the habitat of the different animals.

And it is real jungle. That was one thing that I was really quite shocked about. It's not the kind of rainforest that we're used to in Australia. This is really, real jungle. It's a hugely tall canopy, and thick ... you know, some days we just wouldn't see sunlight at all.

We often walked on the very narrow ridges of mountains. This is where I think you see the jungle at its best and you see the side of the mountains just dripping in rainforest and thick jungle growth. And you see how massive it is. It's breathtaking, and that's one of the reasons I'd like to take my family back there.

Towards the end of the trek, when we came out of the jungle, we literally felt like we were coming out of a cave, and coming out into the sunlight, and then beside a river again.

That last day, that's when we came out of the out of the national park into some pockets of privately owned land. And that's where we started to see the palm oil trees.

CS: What was it like to visit the site of the 500 hectares of oil palm that have been planted illegally?

Tara: The project is where the national park borders onto private land, which is covered with palm oil plantations.

Panut Hadisiswoyo, the founder of the Orangutan Information Centre, took us to the project. He showed us the boundaries of the national park. And of course we could see that the companies that are growing the palm oil are stealing the land of the national park land to plant their palm oil there.

Panut is not really about stopping the whole palm oil industry, because that would affect the livelihoods of those who work on these plantations. But he is very passionate about preserving what is left of the national park, which is why he is working to employ local people to cut down palm oil that is in the national park, and then replant rainforest.

We planted a few trees while we were there and took a bit of a trip through about 400 hectares that the the local villagers have already planted over the past three years. Some of the trees were already 12 to 14 feet high.

So that was fantastic, to actually see what he and the young men employed on the project are doing, and what the project is about.

CS: Tara, what were the lasting impressions that remain with you now, when you look back on your trip?

Tara: The Gunung Leuser is such an important rainforest. It's all that's left. There are only 6,624 Sumatran orangutans remaining and most of them live in and around this national park. I truly think it's a great project.

Panut really impressed me. He's an Indonesian village boy, who's studied in Indonesia and the UK and to me is the kind of person who you can absolutely trust with your philanthropic money, whether it's \$20 or \$20,000. He really is the genuine article as far as honesty and integrity, and somebody who's incredibly passionate about what he's doing.

So for me, it's a really easy decision to support this project through Rainforest Rescue.