



Photos courtesy of Lacy Corlis

CORLIS helped guide a teen conservation course on water quality, wildlife monitoring and tree preservation. "We hiked through the jungle at night, a terrifying and amazing experience," she writes. Below, Corlis counts seedlings.

## LACY

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jungle with Taing and Mr. Arbu for seed collection. We bushwhacked through the leech-laden jungle until one of my guides would excitedly notice a big tree, and we would scour the ground around it for various seeds, or seedlings if we were lucky. Each day took us to a new location. Travelling down tributaries off the main Kinabatangan River made for excellent wildlife viewing. Mr. Arbu sat on the bow of the boat and used his machete to clear brush so our boat could make it through the narrow canals.

One afternoon, I was having a post-lunch nap near the lake on the deck of the eco camp and I awoke to a strange sound. As I rubbed my eyes open I noticed a 3 foot long monitor lizard grazing its tongue towards me, just steps away. Jumping up with a squeal, the men working at the camp all got a hearty laugh out of the ordeal. The lizard slowly sauntered back to the water, and as I calmed, I laughed at myself with the men.

In the evenings after work, we cruised down the river back to the village; sunset provided the best wildlife photo opportunities. The monkeys head towards river to rest at night, as do the birds and reptiles. I saw

several species of monkey, orangutan, kingfishers with bright colors, storks, crocodiles, monitor lizards, hawks, hornbills, and so much more. It was truly a magical place.

During my stay, I also worked in the local plant nursery, planting and nurturing the seeds and seedlings we had collected. I spent time maintaining trails, which basically meant swinging a machete until my arms went numb, in between stints of peeling leeches off of my skin and pulling barbed plant stragglers out of my hair. One weekend, I took a group of teenagers out in the forest for a camp over and environmental education course. We examined the importance of water quality, wildlife monitoring and tree preservation. We hiked through the jungle at night, a terrifying and amazing experience. The nocturnal insects and birds were something out of a fantasy. At one point we all turned off our flashlights and just listened to the forest in pitch darkness. I was surprised at their forest knowledge; they could identify many species and they even showed me a few plants which we were able to harvest for dinner that night.

There were other days spent out in the hot, equatorial sun planting trees in lands that had previously been palm oil plantations. These days made me appre-



ciated the humidity and shade during our swampy forest hikes. I spent time weaving away invasive vines from freshly planted trees to give them some space to grow. Some days, I just spent cleaning up the village and offering English lessons to anyone who wanted to practice.

Three weeks of volunteering went by too fast. As a reward for my work, I got to spend my last day in the rainforest just playing. Taing took me off on an adventure about an hour upstream to visit some swift bird caves and sacred burial grounds. We spent the entire day scrambling up and down slopes, exploring caves, shouting off the top of mountains and resisting the urge to jump into the crocodile-filled river to cool off. At one point we lost our way

and spent about three hours marking trees and searching for a high point to find our direction again. It was an adventure I never wanted to end.

On my final day, I walked through the village and said my goodbyes. I had found such warmth and friendship on that little street. Children chased me for the last time, and my host families came out from their homes to give me a hug and bid me farewell. Mr. Arbu and Taing presented me with some handmade bracelets to thank me for my work. As I boarded the bus to head back to Kota Kinabalu, I cried just a little looking back. I know that forever a piece of my heart will rest in Mengaris Village.

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