

Through support from the George Bredin Travel Fund, I attended a departmental field course in tropical forest ecology. I joined four professors and about twenty other second-year undergraduates to fly to Borneo in May of 2023. The course took place in Danum Valley Conservation Area in Sabah, a Malaysian state on the island of Borneo exemplifying the major challenges and prospects of modern rainforest conservation.

The course was rigorous and expansive, introducing hands-on field techniques in the study of birds, bats, insects, and plants. I helped put up mist nets and practiced handling and identifying the birds we caught, gathered data on an experimental cohort of saplings, and caught butterflies and moths using nets and fruit traps. In the evenings, faculty gave lectures about their areas of expertise and the natural history of the local environment.

In the second half of the course, we split into small groups to design and execute original research projects. My team decided to design a mark-release-recapture experiment to assess whether moths and butterflies regularly cross the large river near the field station. This would have implications in designing forest reserves; if natural boundaries like rivers effectively split populations of animals with minimal migration, these smaller populations may be more vulnerable to stochastic effects and genetic drift. Though the scope of our project limited the amount of data we could collect on potential recaptures, we were able to generate a large dataset on the composition of initial captures and analyze community differentiation in areas with high or low levels of anthropogenic disturbance. Once back in Oxford, we performed statistical analyses of our results and created scientific posters which were then assessed by our course leaders.



Throughout the course, the rainforest setting provided a huge amount of informal enrichment. A huge amount of camaraderie built up between the students, whether we were playing cards or commiserating about the relative discomfort of our material condition (Spiders in the showers! No wi-fi! Sleeping leech wounds! Heat! Laundry that gets rained on! Hornets in the butterfly traps!). On a more positive note, we were able to see a great variety of the characteristic wildlife of the Southeast Asian rainforest, including several orangutans, elephants from the safety of our vehicles, a green viper that never seemed to move, and more birds and insects than I can count.

As a group, we made several side trips to demonstrate the economic valuation of rainforests in Borneo. We stopped at a high-end ecotourist lodge, walked around a plantation growing oil palm—a crop famous for its role in tropical deforestation—and toured a nursery growing tree seedlings for forest restoration.

This was a formative experience for several reasons. For one, I was convinced that I wanted to be something of an ‘indoor ecologist’—and I was pursuing career opportunities to that end, looking at internships where I would work with large, pre-existing datasets collected either by other field ecologists or through remote sensing. After completing the field course, I realized I wanted nothing of the sort. As much as I still enjoy climate-controlled rooms and lovely libraries and meticulous self-care rituals and dramatic bell sleeves that would never be permitted in the field, I had found this irresistible desire within myself for dirt and mud and sweat and blood and giving all my ugliest shirts their time to shine. All of it was in the name of conserving some of the most astonishing beauty in the world, which I had been so privileged to see.



I’ve been following up on those skills and lessons all summer. I’ve been out in the field, this time in my home state of California, surveying birds and mosses in cemeteries. That project has been entirely mine—I thought of it, planned out every detail, executed the fieldwork alone, and owned the results. I never would have had the confidence to undertake that project without the practical skills and research independence the Borneo trip helped build. I’ve also been applying to graduate programs, with my newfound affinity for forestry and fieldwork completely shaping my research interests going forward.

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