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## Up Close: An Interview

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## Up Close: An Interview

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Madison (Madi) Vorva graduated from Pomona College in 2017, an Environmental Analysis major. A two-time winner of the Udall Fellowship, and a member of the board of Jane Goodall's Roots&Shoots program, she was honored as a United Nations Forest Hero for co-leading Project ORANGS, a successful, eight-year campaign to get the Girl Scouts to source responsible palm oil in their cookies. Madi's mission is to show other young people how their everyday actions have global impacts and empower girls to lead. She has trained hundreds of students in the US and abroad in the Roots&Shoots Community Mapping model, an impactful service-learning tool.

## Up Close: An Interview

Madi Vorva<sup>1</sup>  
Pomona College

**Abstract:** a long-time US activist against the deleterious impact of oil-palm deforestation in Southeast Asia learned a great deal about the indigenous peoples' struggles there to gain control over their lives and livelihoods.

Q: What was the most important thing you learned during the clinic trip to Southeast Asia?

I learned that international research is challenging because you do not know the relationships/tensions/partnerships between the local organizations/individuals before your trip or even fully while you are there. It can be difficult to decipher the personal opinions/differences from a single, simplistic overarching narrative. In our case, we heard it loud and clear that stopping the [Baram Dam](#) project was crucial. It was harder to go a step further and learn about the cultural/socio economic/ geopolitical relations of the 26 Dayak tribes. This was due to language barriers that barred substantial one-on-one conversation, time and the ability to establish a genuine connection/trust. It is important to remember that every person will have a different perspective on the ground, and it is never as simple as “palm oil is good/bad” or “deforestation is bad/good”.

Q: How did the trip contribute to your understanding of development, sustainability, food systems, the environment, human rights, and/or sovereignty?

The term “development” has a good or bad reputation, depending on who you are talking to. Economists argue that economic development brings greater resource access and social mobility, decreasing poverty and increasing education. Sociologists could share how development comes with cultural/societal shifts, and migration from rural lifestyles to city/monetized work. Environmentalists could explain how greater resource exploitation results in loss of biodiversity, land use change, and water/air pollution. The EnviroLab Asia trip's liberal arts focus provided us with many different perspectives both from faculty on the trip, and the nonprofit/educational/governmental and business interests we met with in Singapore and Malaysia. Balancing development and environmental degradation requires a baseline understanding of these perspectives. Our time with [Save Rivers](#) and the Dayak tribes also illuminated how closely environmental degradation and human rights violations are linked.

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<sup>1</sup> Madison (Madi) Vorva graduated from Pomona College in 2017, an Environmental Analysis major. A two-time winner of the Udall Fellowship, and a member of the board of Jane Goodall's Roots&Shoots program, she was honored as a United Nations Forest Hero for co-leading Project ORANGS, a successful, eight-year campaign to get the Girl Scouts to source responsible palm oil in their cookies. Madi's mission is to show other young people how their everyday actions have global impacts and empower girls to lead. She has trained hundreds of students in the US and abroad in the Roots&Shoots Community Mapping model, an impactful service-learning tool.

Marginalized people (in this case the Indigenous communities) were protesting land grabbing for a hydroelectric dam project and illegal logging. Both activities destroy forest, emit GHG emissions, destroy watersheds and cause biodiversity loss. I also saw firsthand just how food systems are globalized today. The oil palm grown in Malaysia, could be traded by Wilmar based in Singapore, and end up at an AAK refinery in Newark, NJ. Understanding where our food comes from and how it is produced can lead to more responsible choices.

Q: Was there a particular moment in which you felt surprised/ concerned/ troubled/ or hopeful?

The bump, bump, bump of the truck tires slamming into potholes on the logging roads hurled me against the side of the jeep and the person sitting next to me. I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing away the consuming humidity and my pounding headache. A particularly huge rut sent our jeep airborne, jolting me wide awake. I was immensely relieved that we didn't lose a tire and that the airbags hadn't gone off (who are we kidding, there probably weren't any airbags!)

Surprised we were still speeding along, I glanced outside my window, and was filled with wonder. I honestly do not remember the last time a view took my breath away before this. I was overtaken by the vast mountains of forests that stretched in every direction. Shades of green glistened in the sun with bursts of red and pink flowers surrounded in a cloud haze. I felt like I was floating. Cut into the mountains were festering logging scars: bare, orange brown soil that had eroded deep trenches into the cliff sides from the rain.

Later, the Dayak people explained that the area had been clearcut just 25 years ago. For years, they had resisted further logging, guarding metal blockades they built across the logging roads. The tree canopy was taller than what I am accustomed to seeing back home. However, these were not the massive trees of a pristine rainforest. This was a very human landscape, from the logging road that carried me deeper into the forest, to the oil palm trees planted along the roadsides to the adolescent trees themselves.

Q: Was there any one meeting, activity, or person who made a strong impression?

Dancing on the porch of the longhouse made a strong impression on me. As a ballet dancer, I am fascinated by all forms of dance; any form of movement's style and technique contain cultural clues. When the group danced with our Dayak hosts, we were able to break through more barriers than trying to communicate through language. The dance generated giggles, genuine smiles, excitement, shy and then joyful participation from everyone. The sound of the music was new to me, created from instruments I had never seen before. Trees only found in the local forest were chopped to craft them—a physical tie to nature in the music's every beat.

Q: Did the trip open up new areas of interest or research for you? If so, what?

This trip inspired me to design an independent study this semester on community mapping for conservation. Peter, our guide routinely mentioned the need for community maps. I was familiar with community mapping through my work with the Jane Goodall Institute and decided to learn more about it. I am creating a story map for the [Jane Goodall Institute](#) on their conservation approach and trying to partner with nonprofits working in Sarawak including the [Borneo Project](#)

and [SAVE Rivers](#) to get access to data and provide helpful GIS analysis. This trip also inspired my thesis idea- to design a mapping case study for high schoolers that illuminates the relationships between social, economic and ecological needs of a community abroad.

Q: In what ways did the meetings with people in Southeast Asia (meetings with officials, companies, farmers, NGOs, and indigenous communities) and other activities contribute to your learning, research, or future goals?

Before the Envirolab Asia trip, I knew very little about Singapore and its food system. Visiting one of the last organic farms in the country and listening to the farmer's story was really interesting. I did not know that most of the population lives in government housing and that agricultural land is leased from the government for only a few years before the contract is renegotiated. This made organic farming a very difficult investment because establishing a farm takes time and upfront capital for infrastructure and machinery. Unfortunately, because the Singaporean government decided to increasingly rely on imported food, the farmer will lose his land contract and move his operations to Thailand. In Singapore's case, food security is closely linked to national stability and reliance on trade agreements.

Q: One of the goals of EnviroLab Asia is to be multidisciplinary. In what ways were you exposed to multiple or different disciplines during the clinic trip? What are your reflections upon this approach?

I learned so much from the professors on the trip. Zayn Kassam and I had great conversations about religion, culture and the environment. We discussed how the Dayak's combination of pagan/Christian views influenced their relationship with their local environment and their opposition towards the dam that would flood their churches and burial sites. The blockades had crosses, a symbol of strength and sacrifice that they rebuilt 3 times to prevent illegal logging. Marc Los Huertos' talk about water quality and river ecology got me thinking about the relationships between agriculture, erosion and river health. We tested turbidity, pH and dissolved oxygen levels. Stephen Marks and I had a long debate on the economic ramifications of trying to curtail palm oil expansion. Marty Meyer and I talked a lot about how to measure and evaluate biodiversity in an ecosystem and how you define sustainable palm oil standards that are scientifically accurate. These three conversations were incredibly fruitful and some of my favorite moments from the trip. I'm taking classes with Marty and Zayn Kassam because of their enthusiasm and encouragement. Marc is also helping with my independent study. I thought the multidisciplinary approach is critical to understanding the connections between so many fields to fully address environmental development challenges.

Q: What did you encounter in the trip teach you about yourself, about environmental issues in Asia, about advocacy & social justice, and/or knowledge & practice?

This trip affirmed my passion and interest in these issues. After nearly 10 years of talking about the impacts of palm oil in Southeast Asia, this was my first chance to see it on the ground. While my approach in terms of raising awareness through a campaign is finished, I want to take what I have learned to help introduce other young people to the complexities of international conservation. For me, this trip only led to more complexity and confusion in terms of what

should be done to make the oil palm industry sustainable. The deforestation-free standards look good on paper, but implementation on the ground is missing, and it is the most important piece. What is an appropriate role for me to be involved in this new challenge, as a white, young, American? This trip also affirmed the importance of local partnerships on the ground. Trying to fully understand these issues requires participation from those whose lives are directly impacted. I hope we were able to teach our hosts something about our culture/lives because they were so gracious in sharing with us.

Q: What do you think we need to investigate further?

I think we need to investigate the consumer side of the oil palm supply chain in Asia. China and India are the largest consumers of palm oil globally. Their consumers are also not calling for deforestation-free standards like some customers in Europe and the US. Why? How can we partner with students/organizations in those countries to call for transformation in the palm oil industry together?