



Rachel Henson
School of Biosciences
Cardiff University

“Given your degree, what are you looking forward to in the future?”

I didn't want to enter Higher Education. At the time it seemed to me that another three years of studying would leave me in the same jobless situation as I found myself in after leaving school, with only a mind full of useless information and a significant amount of debt to show for it. However, a combination of an over-zealous deputy head teacher, a lack of other ideas and too much time watching 'Planet Earth' made me change my mind, and after accepting the chosen path I approached my new venture of studying biology with a nervous enthusiasm. I had long nurtured an insatiable interest in both primates and conservation and had not yet assigned to the dustbin my childhood dream of travelling to Borneo and working with the great apes. Despite the fact that it seemed as feasible as my younger brother's ambition to build a hovercraft out of a vacuum cleaner and a discarded car tyre in the summer holidays, I decided it would be an interesting line of study to pursue for a few years even if nothing came of it. Pestering the local ape rescue centre for a job in their gift shop would always be there as a fall-back option.

The first year of my studies saw my fervour for the subject wax and wane in accordance with the variety of topics covered. Hours would crawl by in a morning of seemingly irrelevant, yet compulsory, statistics workshops before an afternoon of undivided attention given to a lecture on tropical diversity. Similarly my comfort level would fluctuate from complete understanding to a sense of being utterly overwhelmed by a mere change in lecturer, teaching style or subject matter. The prospect of continuing in a research career never once crossed my mind; pride prevented me from upturning my original convictions that a degree in biology would be of no more use to my conservation aspirations than a subscription to the New Music Express would be to a Mozart enthusiast. I entered my second year with a comparable mentality but still nursing the faint hope that the technicalities of nutrient uptake in *Arabidopsis thaliana* would one day come in handy somewhere other than the examination room.

It was then that I received the email that would change my life beyond all expectations. The opportunity had arisen to spend one year at a research centre in the jungle of Sabah on the island of Borneo as part of the professional training year scheme. I'm writing this after a day of data analysis in temperatures of thirty degrees. I'm a little behind schedule this week because I spent most of Monday and Tuesday following a mother orang-utan with a tiny baby as I'm busy trying to establish the key trees involved in the great ape's diet, which consists mainly of fruit and leaves. Suddenly everything clicked into place and it didn't take me long to realise I would be lost without the statistics workshops that induced so many headaches in my first year. A field course in the wet Brecon Beacons equipped me with techniques I would otherwise have had to learn from scratch and information from plant biology modules has been invaluable; how a tree survives frequent inundation is all the more relevant now that I'm living on a floodplain!

The eight months I've spent extracting and piecing together the fragments of biological knowledge that slowly infused their way into the deepest and darkest cavities of my brain back in Cardiff have also provided me with ample time for reflection. The researchers that pass through the field centre on their quests for tropical data have imparted a wealth of knowledge and an array of conservation ideas and perspectives as diverse as the insect life that accumulates if I leave my head torch on for too long. Most importantly though I've been able to witness biology in action through conservation, and can finally see the importance of finishing my studies before embarking on such a career. To progress constructively in the sustainable development of our world, and to educate the general public as important discoveries are made, people in this line of work unquestionably need a thorough understanding of the environment they're trying to protect. If this

means occasionally enduring a talk that's not of direct interest, or slaving over a piece of work that's far less enticing than watching re-runs of *The Vicar of Dibley* with less motivated housemates, then that's what I'll do. I've learnt that things that seem to be of the least use at the time are often the ones that turn out to be the most precious.

Now I can't imagine doing anything other than continuing to pursue the answers to the never-ending supply of puzzles that need solving to preserve our forests; the last pockets of paradise that support more plant and animal life than anywhere else on the planet. From the lecture theatre to direct experience I've observed local people, scientists, industry, politicians and wildlife coming to terms with the challenges we face in the twenty-first century and the complexity of the situation has unravelled in my mind at an alarming rate. How can we responsibly move our people forward with sustainable human development whilst fulfilling our role as guardians to the living things that so depend on our actions? The future may still be far from clear to me but studying biology has lifted the fog enough to see which direction I'm heading in. I look forward to making the most of this year, returning to complete my degree and taking my next steps into the unknown with an increased sense of motivation, conviction and purpose. Furthermore it's cemented my belief that with a little bit of luck and a lot of hard work it is truly possible to achieve your wildest dreams.