**Indonesian dentist helps reforest orangutan habitat**

Yvonne Bachmann

Dr Hotlin Ompusunggu, a Samatran dentist, is the co-founder and programme manager of Alam Sehat Lestari (ASRI), a health-care and conservation charity located in Sukadana on the Indonesian island of Borneo. She was recently given the Whitley Award for her efforts to improve the health and well-being of rainforest communities, while also safeguarding a globally important habitat for gibbons, hornbills and orangutans, amongst many other species.

The Whitley Award is a British nature conservation prize that comes with £30,000 (£47,500) prize money. Whitley Awards are made annually at a ceremony in London, hosted by Princess Anne, Princess Royal.

“It feels exciting having won the award,” Hotlin Ompusunggu told Dental Tribune in an interview. The 56-year-old dentist, originally from Sumatra, now works in Gunung Palung National Park in West Kalimantan, an international conservation area on the island of Borneo. The park is home to about ten percent of the world’s orangutans, as well as clouded leopards, hornbills, crested fireback pheasants and sun-bears. Its twin 1,000 metres peaks are swathed by tall dipterocarpous forests in their lowlands and montane cloud forests near their summits. The park is a watershed for the roughly 60,000 villagers who live in its borders.

**Health-care provision almost impossible**

Local people living around the park are poor, with an average income of US$15 a month. The provision of good local health care is almost impossible in this region. Most people are subsistence farmers, and local farming methods are heavily reliant on expensive and dangerous chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Health-care and farming costs drive villagers into debt, and illegal logging is one of the few sources of cash income. Logging and slash-and-burn agriculture are destroying the Gunung Palung watershed, resulting in flooding, damage to agricultural areas, and high rates of waterborne illnesses. And so the cycle of poor health, poverty and environmental destruction is perpetuated.

The charity’s name ‘Alam Sehat Lestari’ means ‘Healthy Nature, Everlasting’ and the administration ASRI, ‘harmoniously balanced’. ASRI aims to stop the progression of health deprivation, and via its foundation by working to empower local people to turn from loggers into guardians. Members work with local communities to integrate high quality, affordable health care with strategies to protect the threatened orangutan forest park. The charity enables local people to access health care that they could normally not afford, providing villagers with free cataract surgery, as well as immunisation, general medicine. They are also educated on health, the environment and the importance of protecting the links between both. In return, villagers exchange items used in conservation work, e.g. seedlings for reforestation or manure for organic farming, or participate in work like replanting parts of the park previously damaged by illegal logging. In this way, the villagers help ASRI to conserve Gunung Palung National Park and, ultimately, the fate of the park lies in their hands.

The ASRI clinic was born in 2007 when Hotlin Ompusunggu began working with Dr Kinari Webb, founder of Health In Harmony (HIH), a US-based non-profit organisation that supported the establishment of the Indonesian ASRI. “HIH supports ASRI through fundraising, by coordinating volunteer loggers for ASRI, and providing knowledge resources when they are needed,” Antonia Gorog, HIH Programme Director, told Dental Tribune. “The organisation was founded on the principle that human health and environmental health are tightly linked,” she explained.

**Poor dental hygiene**

For the people in West Kalimantan poor dental hygiene is a major problem across the board. “When I came here in 2007 and first started treating patients, I did a survey. The results showed that 100 per cent of the people were in great need of dental care,” Hotlin Ompusunggu said.

“I have worked in many places in Indonesia and think with regard to severely disadvantaged members of the community and receive in return the first kid goat and sacks of manure for organic composting, and Organic Farming Training, which helps farmers improve soil quality and removes the need for opening new farmland each year,” Antonia Gorog said.

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Dr Hotlin Ompusunggu receiving the Whitley Award from Anne, Princess Royal (DT/Tyco Patthy Fund for Nature 1)

**Prize money funds new employees**

ASRI employs 42 staff members, including four doctors, a pharmacist, conservation education staff, reforestation staff, a Goats for Widows manager and 14 village women who help to prevent drug-resistant tuberculosis by ensuring patients take their medication.

In May, 50 Forest Guardians joined the team. Their wages are paid from the Whitley Award prize money. “We knew the money should be paid towards new staff that help to protect the park,” the dentist explained. “This plan was part of the proposal for the Whitley Award.”

According to Antonia Gorog, the number of staff is no indication of the number of people involved. “Many thousands are involved. In 2009, first year of ASRI’s reforestation programme, 4,000 families gave seedlings and other essentials for the reforestation in exchange for mosquito nets. In the 2010 reforestation effort, hundreds of people traded seedlings for toothbrushes. Hundreds more helped in the planting both years. Over 100 people delivered goats, and the 14,000 patients that we have cared for in our clinic and the mobile clinic,”

Even though ASRI was initially received with scepticism by some local communities, they have given it their support over time. The charity strives to be honest and transparent about the programme’s goals and is extremely prudent regarding the use of funds. “ASRI has successfully demonstrated to local communities that it really is about helping them, and not out for its own gain,” Antonia Gorog emphasised.

**Support is always welcomed**

The organisation is always grateful for any support. HIH coordinates expert volunteers for ASRI, such as medical professionals who could help to train Indonesian doctors and nurses in the clinic, or people knowledgeable about organic farming and reforestation. “Additional expertise in goat husbandry, composting and organic farming and reforestation work in exchange for mosquito nets. In the 2010 reforestation effort, hundreds of people received goats, and the 14,000 patients that we have cared for in our clinic and the mobile clinic,”

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Any support will help. “Our clinic and mobile clinic. -- “Our goal is to train forest guards, work on reforestation and manage goats, and receive in return the first kid goat and sacks of manure for organic composting and Organic Farming Training, which helps farmers improve soil quality and removes the need for opening new farmland each year.”

Antonia Gorog told.

Anyone wishing to support the organisation can donate money both in Indonesia and tax-exempt in the US. Donations will support much-needed medical or dental equipment, as well as the orangutan habitat and train communities in alternative livelihoods. For information on how to donate, interested people can contact ASRI and/or HIH through their websites: www.asri.or.id and www.healthinharmony.org.