

Fragile Wonders

Indonesia's Beauty and the Battle for Sustainability



Table of Content

Introduction	4 - 9
Interviews	10 - 53
Gili Eco Trust: Interview with Delphine Robbe	10 - 21
Java Turtle Lodge: Interview with Poer Hadi	22 - 29
Waste Colonialism: Interview with Yudha Kusuma Putera	30 - 35
Sumatra Trash Bank: Interview with Angela	36 - 43
Eco Jungle Trekking: Interview with Andy	44 - 53
Final Reflection	54 - 55
Disclosure	56 - 57

Introduction

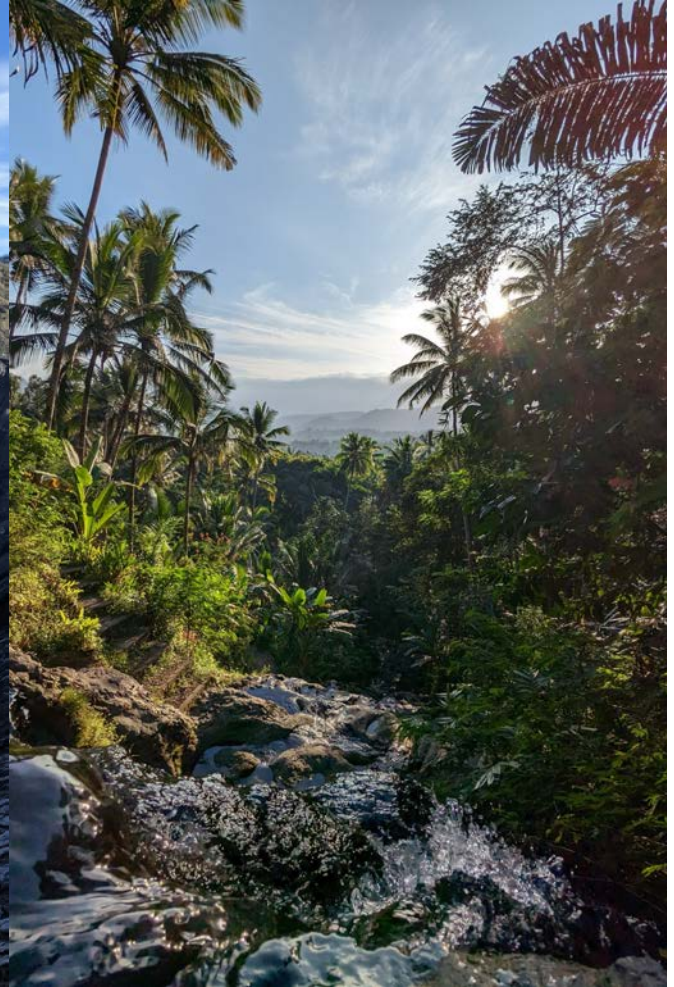
Indonesia, with a population of nearly 280 million, is the fourth most populated country in the world. Spanning over 17,000 islands, it is home to some of the most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet, as well as endangered species like orangutans and the Sumatran tiger. From its breath-taking volcanic landscapes to its lush rainforests and remote islands, Indonesia offers a stunning array of natural beauty. One of the most iconic examples is Komodo National Park, which is recognized as one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World.

Yet, Indonesia is more than just a popular tourist destination. As a rapidly developing country in the Global South, it provides a powerful lens through which we can examine the global challenges brought on by the climate crisis and the loss of biodiversity. The country embodies the complex question of how we, as a global community, will navigate the changes ahead. While striving for economic prosperity with steady annual growth, Indonesia faces the difficult balancing act of pursuing progress while managing the environmental and social consequences. One of the most controversial developments is the planned creation of a new capital, Nusantara, deep in the jungle of Borneo - as the current capital, Jakarta, is not only in danger of sinking in smog, but soon also into the sea.

This project emerged from a two-month journey across Indonesia in the summer of 2023. During this time, I had the opportunity to interview a diverse range of individuals and organizations dedicated to environmental conservation. The goal was to capture the profound beauty and rich diversity of Indonesia, while also highlighting the pressing environmental challenges it faces. Through these interviews, I sought to understand the delicate balance between progress and preservation, and the role of both local communities and the global audience in shaping Indonesia's future.

This photo essay invites you to explore Indonesia's current reality - its struggles, its resilience, and its vision for the future. It also reflects on the role we play as tourists and members of a prosperous, often disconnected society, and how we might contribute to or challenge these complex dynamics. But beyond presenting the challenges, this project also seeks to inspire action - both large and small - in the hope of fostering a more sustainable and mindful way forward.











Gili Trawangan, Lombok, Indonesia

Gili Eco Trust

Delphine Robbe is the coordinator of the Gili Eco Trust, an NGO based on Gili Trawangan, which was founded in 2001. The Gili Eco Trust was started to protect the coral reefs from destructive fishing. Today, the Gili Eco Trust is not only committed to the protection of corals, but also to sustainable tourism and combating the waste problem on the Gili Islands. In doing so, close cooperation with the local population is always ensured. More information about the work can be found on the website or in the 'Annual Impact Report'. The best way to support the Gili Eco Trust is through donations or voluntary work.



Website



Annual Impact
Report



Interview with Delphine Robbe

Welcome, Delphine. Could you give me a brief overview of what you're currently working on here?

Delphine: It's going to take me half an hour to explain it.

Maybe try to summarize it in two minutes then.

Delphine: Well, the Gili Eco Trust was founded in 2001 to protect the reef and marine life from destructive fishing practices, like dynamite fishing. Over time, we expanded to address other issues like animal welfare on land, waste management, and creating sustainable solutions for ecotourism. Our goal is to ensure the island's long-term sustainability.

What's your personal view on tourism here? Is it more of a savior or a threat to the island?

Delphine: The island wouldn't exist without tourism - people wouldn't stay here. But the problem is that more than half of the businesses aren't operating sustainably. They don't have proper septic systems, they aren't using renewable energy, and they're contributing to environmental harm. On the other hand, without tourism, we wouldn't be able to fund our projects. We rely on donations from tourists and use that to promote ecotourism and raise awareness. Globally, tourism tends to harm the environment, but with initiatives like ours, we try to catch up with these issues.

As someone traveling through Indonesia, what advice would you give to help me travel more sustainably?

Delphine: Traveling sustainably in Indonesia can be tough, but you can make a difference by being eco-conscious. Avoid flying when possible, bring your own reusable containers - like a lunch box, water bottle, and bags - so you can minimize waste. By doing small things like these, you also raise awareness among locals. In Indonesia, many people are receptive to information, so even if only 10% of them act on it, it's still progress. Also, be mindful of where you stay. Many so-called "eco-resorts" are just greenwashing - they charge a lot but don't do much for the community or the environment. So try to support places that genuinely practice sustainability.

What motivated you to start contributing so much to the island?

Delphine: I was a diving instructor, but my studies background is engineering. At some point, teaching diving felt repetitive, and I wanted to give back. My family has always valued environmental respect and community engagement, so I guess it's part of my upbringing. If you live somewhere, you should try to make it the best it can be.

What would you say is the biggest environmental problem on the island?

Delphine: It's the waste. It's piling up in the middle of the island. That's the visible issue. But there are also hidden problems, like the sewage and greywater that are damaging the reef. People don't realize yet how much harm that's doing, but it's already killing parts of the reef.



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And what about Indonesia as a whole? What are the biggest environmental challenges?

Delphine: First, it's waste, but it's also things like reef destruction and global warming. Indonesia has 17,000 islands, and if they don't limit fossil fuel use and plastic pollution, they'll lose a lot of land. Jakarta, for example, is sinking due to both global and local issues. The loss of the reefs also means losing protection for the beaches - reefs slow down the waves and help maintain the sand.

In your work, do you get support from the government, or is that an issue as well?

Delphine: The government appreciates what I'm doing, and they often ask for advice. But they don't provide much help. The biggest frustration comes from dealing with government bureaucracy. For example, getting authorization to restore a part of the reef or set up a mooring buoy can take months because everything has to go through the central government. And with waste management, the facilities we've had since January 2020 still haven't been approved for use. The equipment is just rusting away while we wait for authorization.

That sounds frustrating. How do you convince local people to engage with your projects and raise awareness?

Delphine: Many locals know me, especially since I teach at the local school. Some of them are very supportive - they join beach clean-ups, ask for time off from work to help, or train others in their businesses. But not everyone gets it. Some people think, "Oh, the Trust will clean it up", and leave their rubbish, which can be frustrating. But for my own sanity, I focus on the positive examples.

Do you believe starting with education in schools is the key to change?

Delphine: Education is definitely important, but it's also about leading by example. In Indonesia, people tend to follow actions more than instructions. You can't just tell them what to do - you have to show them.

What's your main source of funding for your work? How do you sustain all these projects?

Delphine: We rely on donations - both from tourists and from dive shops that help collect donations. We also apply for grants and have accounts on donation platforms like *Give.Asia* and *GlobalGiving*. During COVID, we applied for a lot more grants than usual because we had no local donations. Normally, I'd apply for five a year, but during COVID, I applied for 200. Corporate partnerships also help - our latest one is with *SeaCleaners*, who collect rubbish from the ocean, and we manage what's done with that waste on land.

Is there anything companies, especially in Europe, can do to help?

Delphine: Absolutely. Some companies already give a portion of their profits to support environmental causes. For example, there's a lady who makes yoga mats from recycled materials and donates 1% of her sales to us. Companies can contribute in similar ways, either with regular donations or through campaigns.

What's your outlook for the Gili Islands by 2050?

Delphine: Globally, I'm pretty pessimistic about the state of the world and the planet. But locally, I'm hopeful. We're doing a lot of projects, and I think we can make a difference. Still, we might be overwhelmed by larger, global problems.

Lastly, what's your key message for others who want to contribute? What can people learn from your experience?

Delphine: My key message is: "Learn as much as you can and do your bit". Don't wait for politicians or corporations to change things - they won't. Everyone can contribute at their own level, whether that's raising awareness, changing their habits, or helping their community. For instance, most people don't know that up to 80% of the oxygen we breathe comes from the ocean. If people understood things like that, they'd realize how important it is to protect the environment. Every small action helps.

Thank you so much for the nice and insightful conversation, Delphine.





Meru Betiri National Park, Java, Indonesia

Java Turtle Lodge

Poer Hadi is the owner of Java Turtle Lodge, located in East Java near the Meru Betiri National Park. Spanning 580 km², the park is home to the Java tiger and serves as a crucial nesting site for endangered turtle species. Unlike other regions in Indonesia, this area remains relatively untouched by mass tourism. Hadi has established a homestay and offers visitors an authentic experience through local tours into the jungle and to the turtle nesting sites. For the region, Tourism plays a vital role in supporting the livelihoods of locals. In addition to welcoming new guests at the homestay, Hadi is also open to receiving support from volunteers.



Tripadvisor



AirBnB



Interview with Poer Hadi

Let's start with a bit of background. Can you tell me what you were doing before and why you started building the Java Turtle Lodge?

Hadi: Yeah, sure. Before all of this, I was a fisherman. When there were no more fish in the ocean, I had to find another way to support my family. That's when I went to the jungle, looking for ways to make money. One day, I saw tourists coming through travel agencies from Kalibaru and Banyuwangi. That's when the idea came to build a homestay. Well, I didn't know anything about IT, and I couldn't speak English back then. I had this big dream but only 6 million Rupiah (< 400€) to buy the materials. My wife and I worked for five years to build the homestay step by step because I didn't have enough money. Along the way, many guests helped me - they taught me how to promote my place on Booking and AirBnB, how to use Instagram. They were so nice. Now I can earn money without cutting trees or taking animals. In our area, many people used to catch birds from the jungle and sell them, but now we can show those same birds to tourists and can earn money to make a living.

What was your motivation for making this shift? Was it just about covering your financial needs, or did you want to protect nature as well?

Hadi: It was both, it is very important. For example, even our drivers used to do illegal logging. But now, they see they can earn money from tourism instead. So yes, I knew I had to save the jungle and the nature around us.

How do you convince others in the area to join you and stop illegal activities?

Hadi: It's not easy. When I try to talk to some people, they get angry at first. Like the boat drivers - they used to do logging, but now they're busy with tourists, and step by step they understand the value of protecting nature, like the sea turtles.

What would you say is the biggest problem facing the jungle right now? Is it illegal activities, plastic waste, or something else?

Hadi: Illegal logging is better now, and the situation with sea turtles has improved too. But the big problem now is plastic waste. The local people and even the government don't have systems in place for managing it. There's no help with collecting it or disposing of it. Plastic is definitely a major issue.

What would help the most in addressing these issues? Is it more money, more knowledge, or something else?

Hadi: I think it's really important to educate the local people. For example, I'm going to schools to educate the children, and I think that's a good start. If they have better opportunities and earn good money, they won't need to go into the jungle to take turtle eggs or cut down trees like before.

As a tourist, what can I do to make my visit as sustainable as possible?

Hadi: Tourists here are already doing good. But what we really need are volunteers. We need people to help teach English to the local children and help with educating them.





That's a great idea. So, looking ahead, what do you think this area will look like in 20 years?

Hadi: I think now it is already much better and I am optimistic for our area. The tourists bring important income that allows for change, for example to educate the kids.

Thank you so much for your time, Hadi. It's been great talking to you.





Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia

Waste Colonialism

Yudha Kusuma Putera, known as Fehung, is an artist from Yogyakarta, a city renowned as one of Indonesia's cultural hubs. In addition to its many museums, the student city is located near two of the country's most iconic temples: Prambanan and Borobudur. Fehung's artwork was featured in ARTJOG 2023, the city's prominent annual art exhibition, and critically explores the issue of waste colonialism. For more insights into his work, check out the linked Instagram post. To delve deeper into the topic of waste colonialism, the accompanying Guardian article is highly recommended. You can also learn more about Fehung via his Instagram.



Artwork



**Guardian
Article**



Fehung's Insta



Interview with Yudha Kusuma Putera

Let's start with a brief introduction. Can you tell me about yourself, both as a person and in relation to your work?

Fehung: Sure. My friends call me Fehung, and I'm part of an artist collective called MES 56. Over the years, my work has often focused on themes like families, identity, and communities. But in the past two years, my focus shifted. It all began when my wife started collecting trash, and we noticed that the local landfill in Piyungan was filling up quickly. There were times when trash trucks couldn't reach our house for a week, and the smell was unbearable. This made me aware of a much bigger issue - where does all this waste go, and why does it end up where it does? I started researching online and realized this wasn't just a local problem. It's part of a larger issue known as "waste colonialism". Rich countries, unable or unwilling to manage their waste, ship it off to poorer countries, like Indonesia, Malaysia, or the Philippines illegally. That's when I really started digging into the topic and captured my research through video, documentaries, and drawings. Waste colonialism isn't just about countries exploiting other countries; it happens on a city level too. In cities, trash is sent to rural areas, out of sight, so we don't have to confront the problem directly.

That's an interesting point, the idea of colonialism existing not just between countries but within cities themselves. How has this concept influenced your artwork?

Fehung: After my research on waste colonialism, I visited landfills multiple times. This year, they even built a new landfill near the old one. If you look at the photographs, you'll see how birds and cows are part of the ecosystem at the landfill, feeding off both organic and plastic waste. It's a complex, interconnected problem, and I'm trying to show that complexity in my work. I made a video with footage from different perspectives, without pointing fingers, because the question of responsibility is still unclear.

Would you say your artwork is also about raising awareness on how we contribute to the problem by being disconnected from it?

Fehung: Yes, definitely. That's the starting point. There are people living in these landfills, working to collect and recycle plastic, but that doesn't absolve us of responsibility.

What would you say is the biggest environmental problem here in Indonesia?

Fehung: Trash is definitely one of the biggest problems, but it's hidden from view because landfills are far from the cities. But when the landfills are full or closed, it becomes very clear how much we contribute to the waste problem. Another big issue is climate change, especially for agriculture. Fifteen years ago, farmers could predict when the rainy or dry seasons would come. Now, the weather is unpredictable, and it's a huge challenge for them.

And what challenges do people face when trying to solve environmental problems like plastic waste?

Fehung: It's hard to say, but one big challenge is the capitalist system. We're constantly consuming, driven by social media and advertising, but we don't think about managing the waste that comes with it.

What do you hope to achieve with your project?

Fehung: My goal is to help people in the city of Yogyakarta connect with the landfill problem. In my video, you'll see footage of landfills, but the audio is taken from everyday city life - sounds from traditional markets or malls. The idea is to link these two worlds together, so people living in cities can start to feel their connection to the waste issue.

What needs to be done to mitigate plastic pollution in Indonesia?

Fehung: It's not just about updating technology. The problem is that producing new plastic is cheaper than recycling, so the economics don't make sense. We need to find a way to make recycled plastic just as affordable as new plastic, or even limit the use of plastic entirely. But that's difficult when so many street vendors rely on plastic because it's cheap.

So, if you were in a position of power, what would your first step be?

Fehung: As an artist, I don't have a big solution. My goal is more about making people aware that we are part of the problem. Living in Yogyakarta, we contribute to this system, and I want people to understand that.

It's not directly related to your work. But what's your take on tourism in Indonesia? Does it help or hurt the environment?

Fehung: Tourism is good for the economy because it provides jobs, but more tourists also mean more waste. It's a complex issue. In Europe, recycling is more common, but they still ship their waste to other countries. So, the problem isn't solved - it's just moved elsewhere.

What could countries like those in Europe do to help solve the waste issue, instead of just shipping it away?

Fehung: Every country needs to take responsibility for its own waste. Don't send it to us. We have enough problems managing our own waste here. For example, second-hand clothing from Europe or America is shipped here as 'donations' because they are considered as 'rare' here, but a lot of it is just waste.

Very interesting point. Looking ahead to 2050, do you think things will get better or worse?

Fehung: It's hard to say. Climate change and other environmental issues are already affecting everyone around the world, and it will continue to be a major challenge.

Finally, do you have any last thoughts or messages for people who want to make a difference?

Fehung: We all have a responsibility when it comes to our waste. That's my main message.

Thanks so much for sharing your insights, Fehung.



Bukit Lawang, Sumatra, Indonesia

Sumatra Trash Bank

The Sumatra Trash Bank is a non-profit initiative in Bukit Lawang on Sumatra, supported by the German NGO Project Wings since its establishment in 2019. The center focuses on collecting, sorting, and recycling or upcycling plastic waste from the village, for example for the Recycling Village in Bukit Lawang, which Project Wings also initiated. Here, PET bottles and other hard-to-recycle plastic waste are transformed into ecobricks - an innovative construction material for building structures. For a better understanding of the project, a video and the Project Wings website are linked below. You can also follow Sumatra Trash Bank on Instagram.



Video



Project Wings
Website



Sumatra Trash
Bank Insta



Interview with Angela

Could you start by introducing yourself and explaining what you do here at the Sumatra Trash Bank? How did you end up working in this field?

Angela: My name is Angela, and I'm the Managing Director at the Sumatra Trash Bank. We're a team of six people here, primarily focusing on waste management. Our main task is collecting and sorting plastic waste - both hard plastics and softer plastics like those used in soap packaging, which need to be sorted carefully. We have a recycling process in place, which includes chopping machines that prepare the materials before we create new products from the recycled plastic. We also organize community activities, like weekly clean-up actions every Monday, where we invite volunteers, stakeholders, and even hotels and restaurants to join us in sorting and properly disposing of waste. One of the main issues we're tackling in Sumatra is the lack of structured waste management systems. Many people throw rubbish into rivers or the street because we don't have a proper landfill system. We've set up a system where communities can bring their sorted waste to us, and we weigh it and record it in a savings book. At the end of the year, community members can receive money, or exchange their waste for goods like rice or oil, based on how much plastic they've collected. This system helps encourage a mindset shift, but we're still in the early stages.

That's a fascinating model. Can you explain more about the payments and how the community benefits from this system?

Angela: Yes, we focus on education and socialization to make sure people understand the importance of sorting their waste. In Bukit Lawang, many people run businesses, like small restaurants or stores, and they can't always manage their waste properly. So, we have a system where our staff collects the rubbish once or twice a week. We also charge a small fee - about 5,000 Rupiah a week or 20,000 Rupiah per month per household - just to cover our operational costs, like transportation. This is essential because we need resources to keep our five trucks running and maintain the operations. We're also still looking for additional support from the government, as we can't do this alone.

And how do people receive the cashflow from the system?

Angela: People who sort their waste at home can bring it to us, and we process it into products or send it to recycling factories in Medan. After a year, we calculate how much plastic they've contributed, and they receive a pay-out based on the amount. It's an incentive for them to stay engaged throughout the year.





What do you think is needed to convince more locals to get involved with projects like yours?

Angela: Waste management doesn't attract much interest because people associate it with unpleasant things like smells or dirt. But we're trying to make it easier by offering to collect rubbish from their homes and reduce the need for burning, which is still common here. Educating people about the dangers of burning waste is a big part of our mission, especially with large palm oil plantations nearby. We're also working with corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives from local companies. They're required to allocate part of their profits to community projects, and we're trying to get them more involved in our waste management efforts.

What was your personal motivation for getting involved in this work?

Angela: I wanted to make a real difference here, even though it's challenging. Initially, I didn't think it was possible to make a big impact, but I realized that it's more about changing people's habits, one step at a time.

In your view, what is the biggest environmental problem here? Is it waste or the destruction of natural ecosystems?

Angela: The biggest issue is definitely waste management.

Do you think educating people on reducing their plastic use would help?

Angela: We initially planned to focus on education, but we've shifted strategies. Instead of broad education campaigns, we're now doing more targeted socialization - going door-to-door. We have a team of young staff members who help with this. They've been really effective in reaching people on a personal level.

What are the main resources you're lacking? Is it funding or manpower?

Angela: It's both. When we started in 2019, everything was running smoothly, and we had enough resources. But when Corona hit in 2020, it became much harder. We're now in need of more staff - around eight more people - to manage the operations, and we also need financial support. Each staff member earns around 2 million Rupiah per month, which is less than \$200. So, we're always fundraising to keep things going.

What would you say to someone from Europe or elsewhere who wants to make a difference here?

Angela: We have volunteer programs for people who want to help. They can come here and support us, and we'll provide them with accommodation and meals. For those who can't be here in person, we share reports and data on our website, so they can contribute remotely, either by supporting financially or by helping with projects from abroad. Every bit helps.

Looking ahead, what's your outlook for the future? Are you optimistic?

Angela: I'm optimistic, but the main challenge is changing people's mindsets. We live in a tourist area with a strong community, but we need more local involvement. We're also working with larger organizations, like the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity, to get more support. I am not a specialist in the environment - I am learning by doing.

Lastly, what's your message to others who want to create change?

Angela: We're working hard to tackle waste management here, but we need people who are passionate and willing to help.

Thank you, Angela. It's been great talking to you.



Bukit Lawang, Sumatra, Indonesia

Eco Jungle Trekking

Sumatra Vibes offers sustainable trekking tours from Bukit Lawang to the Gunung Leuser National Park. This UNESCO World Heritage site is renowned as the habitat of the critically endangered Sumatran orangutan, as well as the Sumatran rhino, elephant, and tiger. With experienced guides like Andy, visitors can embark on multi-day jungle adventures to explore this extraordinary ecosystem following their motto 'leave nothing but footprints and take nothing but pictures'. Tours can be booked directly on the Sumatra Vibes website. There is also an episode about the National Parks as part of Barack Obama's "Our Great National Parks" on Netflix.



**Sumatra Vibes
Website**



**Netflix
Documentary**



Interview with Andy

Good afternoon, Andy! Could you start by briefly introducing yourself?

Andy: Good afternoon! My name is Andy from Sumatra Vibes Trek and Travel. I was born and raised here in Sumatra, and I've been working as a guide since 2009. For over ten years, I've been leading people from all over the world on jungle tours in the region.

On your website, I noticed a strong emphasis on sustainability. How do you define sustainability in your work, and why is it important?

Andy: Sustainability is vital to us, especially because we live here in the jungle. The jungle is like the lungs of the world, and we are in a critical spot with endangered species that can only be found in Sumatra and Borneo. It's essential for us to care for the jungle as much as we can and ensure that both the environment and the people who visit have a great experience. We want our guests to have the best trip of their lives while also preserving the jungle.

What specific measures do you take to make your tours sustainable? I read, for example, that you don't feed the animals and offer vegetarian meals.

Andy: When we take people into the jungle, we never feed the orangutans or any other animals. Why? There's plenty of natural food for them in the jungle, and feeding them would make them lazy and aggressive. If animals become used to being fed, they might start expecting food from humans and could even attack if we don't have anything to offer. So, we want to keep them wild and ensure they continue to find their own food naturally.

What motivates you personally to work as a tour guide? What do you enjoy most about it?

Andy: I love being a guide! It's a job that allows me to meet people from all over the world, and I really enjoy that. Also, I love the jungle and want to promote this beautiful place so more people can experience it. My motivation is to help others appreciate and understand our region.

What would you say is the biggest environmental challenge facing Bukit Lawang and the surrounding rainforest?

Andy: In the past, illegal logging was a big problem. People from the villages would cut down trees for money or even capture animals to sell as pets. But now, the jungle is protected. We have rangers patrolling regularly, and if anyone is caught logging or hunting animals, they're fined or even sent to jail.

What is your view on tourism? Is it more positive or negative?

Andy: Tourism is the main source of income for people in Bukit Lawang, so it's very important for us. Without tourists, we wouldn't have jobs. Some locals don't like seeing too many tourists in the jungle, but overall, tourism helps us a lot. We can't stop people from coming because many want to see the orangutans, which are only found in two places on Earth. So, in general, tourism is good for the community, but some people think there are too many tourists in the jungle.





Do you think there should be regulations limiting the number of tourists allowed into the jungle at one time?

Andy: Not really. Our peak season is only in July and August, and during the rest of the year, we don't have many tourists. We depend on those two months to earn enough money to get through the year, so we can't afford to limit the number of visitors during that time.

Would you say that tourism helps protect the jungle by providing an alternative source of income for locals, so they don't need to rely on illegal activities like logging or poaching?

Andy: Absolutely. Tourism brings money to the community, which helps reduce illegal activities. Without tourists, people might turn to cutting down trees or capturing animals for money, but because of tourism, we have a way to make a living without harming the environment.

What are your thoughts on palm oil production? It's a major industry in Indonesia, but it has a significant environmental impact.

Andy: Palm oil is something we use for cooking, and it's hard to avoid it. But here in Bukit Lawang, we don't plant any new palm oil trees anymore, and we don't take any more land from the jungle for plantations. We understand the impact, so we're careful to protect the jungle from further deforestation.

Looking to the future, what do you think is necessary to ensure the protection of the jungle and stop illegal deforestation?

Andy: Illegal deforestation isn't a problem here anymore. The rangers patrol the jungle, and every time someone enters the jungle, they have to register. This helps track people and protect the area.

For visitors like myself, what can we do to help protect the jungle, whether while we're here or once we've returned home?

Andy: When you return home, you could consider donating to our projects. We plant fruit trees like durian and jackfruit at the jungle's edge to help feed the wildlife, especially during dry seasons when food is scarce. This prevents animals like orangutans from entering farms and stealing crops, which can cause conflicts with farmers.

How would you describe the relationship between the local community and the orangutans? Has it changed over the years?

Andy: It has definitely improved. In the past, there weren't enough rangers to protect the jungle, and conflicts would arise when orangutans came onto farms and stole crops. But now, we've planted many fruit trees near the jungle to prevent that from happening, and the rangers are doing a great job. There's less conflict now, and we're working hard to maintain that balance.

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact you and the local community?

Andy: The pandemic was really hard for us. For two and a half years, we had no tourists, and since most of our income comes from tourism, it was difficult to survive. Some people received donations from the government, but it wasn't enough. We had to help each other out as best we could. Now, things are getting better. Tourists started coming back last year, and we're hopeful for the future.

Is there anything else you'd like to share as a final message?

Andy: I just want to say that our place is open again, and we welcome everyone to visit! It's been tough, but now the jungle is well protected, and our tours are safe. We'd love for people to come and experience the beauty of Sumatra while also supporting the local community after a difficult few years.

Thanks for the great conversation, Andy.



Final Reflection

Although I have lived abroad multiple times in recent years, few places have touched and inspired me as deeply as Indonesia. The country's beauty and diversity are nothing short of breathtaking. Jungle trekking for several days in Sumatra to observe orangutans in their natural habitat was the fulfillment of a personal childhood dream. However, as a tourist, I cannot ignore the ambivalence I feel about such experiences. On one hand, only a privileged few in the world can afford these journeys, whether due to financial constraints or visa restrictions. On the other hand, tourism inevitably leaves behind a significant environmental footprint.

Diving into the various initiatives and engaging in meaningful discussions with the locals allowed me to see the country beyond the lens of a tourist and critically reflect on my role as one. I've come to realize that most issues aren't black or white but exist in nuanced shades of gray. For instance, in Meru Betiri and Gunung Leuser National Park, I witnessed how tourism plays a vital role in supporting local livelihoods and funding the preservation of sensitive ecosystems. In contrast, Bali and the Gili Islands highlight how unregulated tourism and a lack of cultural and environmental sensitivity can quickly flip the coin and turn into a problem.

One of Indonesia's central challenges, alongside climate change and biodiversity loss, is waste management. This issue is complex and multifaceted. In many areas, waste collection and recycling systems are either insufficient or non-existent.

Although private initiatives like the Gili Eco Trust work to address these challenges, bureaucratic obstacles sometimes hinder their success. Conversely, projects like the Sumatra Trash Bank are thriving and could serve as models for other regions. The global nature of the problem is also striking. Prosperous Western societies often export their waste to countries like Indonesia, intensifying local waste issues. Similarly, in cities like Yogyakarta, waste from urban areas ends up in landfills in rural regions, far removed from the eyes of those responsible. Yudha Fehung's artwork *Colonial Waste* powerfully illustrates how these global and regional issues are deeply intertwined.

Despite the complexity of these problems, there are inspiring examples of change brought about through local empowerment. One of the most striking is Hadi and his Java Turtle Lodge. With savings equivalent to just three days' worth of earnings for a working student in Germany, Hadi has managed to create a sustainable livelihood for himself and his community, which ultimately contributes to the preservation of the last remaining sanctuary for the Java tiger. Especially in view of the current global situation, which leaves me personally in a faint with regard to the environment, it is encounters with people like Hadi that give me confidence and hope. They serve as powerful reminders of the transformative impact grassroots efforts can have.

Disclosure

Transparency

This photo essay is the result of my final project within the Environmental Certificate Program at the Rachel Carson Center of Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich. Dr. Susanne Unger served as the academic supervisor for this project.

The interviews were conducted during a two-month trip throughout Indonesia in June and July 2023. The organizations interviewed were identified through prior online research or discovered during the trip. All interviewees were fully informed about the purpose of the interviews and provided their consent for audio recording and publication.

The audio recordings were transcribed using the built-in transcription feature of Microsoft Word. To address potential language barriers and enhance readability, the transcripts were refined using ChatGPT (Version GPT-4). Throughout this process, journalistic standards for interviews were strictly upheld: no key statements were altered or added. To ensure accuracy, the final texts were carefully compared with the original audio recordings and manually adjusted where necessary. Statements were also reviewed for plausibility to the best extent possible.

Additional context relevant to readers has been provided in the form of QR-codes accompanying the interview descriptions. All images included are original photographs taken during the trip. The submission deadline was February 2nd, 2025.

Additional academic references on the topics

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Final Project

