Indonesian dentist helps reforest orangutan habitat

Dr Hotlin Ompusunggu, a Sumatran 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 award and charity prize that comes with £50,000 (US$74,500) 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,” Dr 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 Indonesian province on the island of Borneo. The park is home to about ten per cent of the world’s orangutans, as well as clouded leopards, hornbills, crested fireback pheasants and sun-bears. Its two 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 living on its borders.

Health-care provision almost impossible

Local people living around the park are poor, with an average income of US$15/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 abbreviation ASRI, ‘harmoniously balanced’. ASRI aims to stop the poverty–poor health–deforestation cycle by working to empower local people to turn from loggers into forest guardians.

Members work with local communities to integrate high-quality, affordable health care with strategies to protect the threatened forests of the park. The charter enables local people to access health care that they could normally not afford, providing villagers with free contraception, as well as immunisation, cataract surgery and 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 Kinarlir Webh, 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 dental care this is one of the worst,” the dentist continued. “The dentist does not only treat patients, but also aims to educate them. She started in-forming patients, particularly children, on dental health care and environmental conservation at the same time. ‘We give out tooth brushes to children, so they can maintain their oral health. However, we quickly learned that things which have been given away for free are not appreciated that much. So we started swapping toothbrushes for bamboo sticks, which we need to plant trees in the park. This way the children will remember that we planted a tree. We want to give them back a tree so that they can contribute to save and replant trees’,” Hotlin Ompusunggu explained to Dental Tribune.

The cornerstone of ASRI’s programme is health care, which is linked to conservation initiatives in multiple ways. Villagers can receive high quality health care, including dental care, at the ASRI clinic on the border of the national park. For local people, there are many ways to receive help. “Communities that cease illegal logging receive discussions on dental care services at the clinic. Other initiatives involve Goats for Widows, a project that provides mated pairs of goats to severely disadvantaged members of the community and receives 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.

In May, 50 Forest Guardians joined the team. “Their wages are paid from the Whitley Award prize money. ‘We knew the money should go 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 effort, hundreds of people traded seedlings for toothbrushes. Hundreds more helped in the planting both years. Over 100 people helped to plant the reseeded, and the 14,000 patients that we have cared for in our clinic and the mobile clinic,” Gorog emphasised.

Support is always welcome

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 natural building will soon build a hospital, solar engineering, and a workshop where storing vessels would also be welcomed,” Antonia Gorog told.

Anyone wishing to support the work locally can donate money both in Indonesia and tax-exempt in the US. Donations provide much-needed medical or dental equipment to the orangutan habitat and train communities in alternative livelihoods to illegally loggers. Interested people can contact ASRI and/or HIH through their websites: www.asri.org.id and www.healthinharmony.org.

Dr Hotlin Ompusunggu (left) receiving the Whitley Award from Anne, Princess Royal. (DT/Photos by Whitley Fund for Nature/1st)