



Pearson Baccalaureate for the IB DIPLOMA

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I was one of those boys who always had a beetle in a matchbox in his pocket and a collection of fossils on his bookshelf. Biology seemed to me the most natural and obvious subject to study, offering endless possibilities. The thing I particularly liked about biology was that not everything was already known. Chemistry had its periodic table, and physics its Newton's laws – biology in contrast seemed more open to new discoveries with horizons I could explore and contribute to. My interest in biology had initially been stimulated through watching David Attenborough's 'Life on Earth' – much of which seemed to me to be set in the most wonderful and enchanting rainforest. The animals in particular fascinated me and this interest led to me studying zoology at A-level and then at degree-level at Leeds University.

During the summer of 1988 I was faced with a dilemma. For my undergraduate dissertation I had to carry out a summer field project. I approached one of the lecturers in my department with the aim of studying gorilla behaviour at London Zoo. The lecturer, Dick Loxton, had other ideas: 'Regents Park will be hot and unpleasant during the summer and the apes will probably just sleep – why don't you pick something else?' A vested interest was about to raise its ugly head. 'What about dung beetles?' I had heard him give an entertaining talk on the subject the term before, in which at one point he showed some pictures that suggested dung-rolling beetles can be found in the UK (they can't – the pictures were a hoax). But he had sold them as an interesting and viable research subject, with comical undertones that appealed to my sense of humour. I spent the summer roaming the UK in search of dung beetles and produced a reasonable dissertation. At the presentation of my work at a seminar the following autumn, another lecturer in the department, Stephen Sutton, was listening – at the end of the talk asked if I had thought about studying tropical dung beetles. That conversation was to change my life; the following summer I found myself en route to a relatively little-known field centre in Malaysian Borneo called Danum Valley. It was the first time I had been outside Europe, my first experience of the exotic Far East, and my first encounter with rainforest. The aim of the work at Danum was to find out the effect of logging on the forest and its native wildlife, which my own project was to contribute to.

Rainforest proved to be the most exciting and wonderful place to explore biology. Once I finished my PhD, I worked for a time at the Natural History Museum, under Nigel Stork, the then Head of Biodiversity. Nigel had pioneered work in the rainforest canopy, and was responsible for contributing to the 'how many species are there on Earth' debate that flourished in the late 80s and 90s. He suggested I applied to become Senior Scientist at Danum, and so was responsible for me returning there in a postdoctoral position now based through Cambridge University, under Tim Clutton-Brock, chairman of the Royal Society programme I was part of (the South-east Asian Rainforest Research Programme). I was responsible for coordinating research on the ground and was able to continue my own research on the effects of disturbance on beetle communities.

After 10 years commuting between the UK and Borneo, instinct led me into teaching. For years, my interest in ecology had to be contained within A-level and GCSE syllabuses, but the advent of IB at my school enabled me to once more fully immerse myself in the fathomless pool that encapsulates the environmental sciences. If you are taking the ESS course you have made the right decision. And who knows, it may lead you on a path through rainforests and a journey not dissimilar to my own.