

Volunteering at the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre

BY LIM HUI WEN



The sun bears looking for snacks



Hui Wen preparing enrichment for the sun bears

I am Lim Hui Wen, a 19-year-old Malaysian currently studying anthropology at University College London (UCL) in the UK. I learned about the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre (BSBCC) through the Roots and Shoots Malaysia Award (RASMA) programme, which encourages the Malaysian youth to connect with the environment through volunteer programmes at various organisations.

I had previously volunteered at a turtle sanctuary at a small island called Lang Tengah off the east coast of Malaysia, right next to Redang Island. During my two weeks at the turtle sanctuary, I gained so much knowledge about turtles and their environment, which piqued my interest in volunteering and learning about other animals in Malaysia.



Hence, for my next volunteering opportunity, I chose BSBCC out of the many organisations offered by the RASMA programme and spent three weeks of my summer in Sabah because I wanted to learn more about the sun bears' life and how a conservation centre functions.

After a three-hour flight from Kuala Lumpur to the very small city of Sandakan in Sabah, I was excited to start my volunteering journey with the Bornean sun bears.

I got off to a bumpy start, having moved from the comforts of urban living – having cool air conditioning at night and reliable Wi-Fi connection – to a place where I slept warm nights under a mosquito net and had barely working Wi-Fi. Although the accommodation was very basic, it was good enough for me as I spent most of

my day at the conservation centre.

There, I learned a lot about the sun bears. For starters, their unique chest mark makes it easier to tell them apart. Their large, sickle-shaped claws enable them to grip trees as well as dig and rip decayed wood apart to reach termites, ants and beetle grubs. Sun bears have long tongues to help them extract honey from stingless bee nests and feed on ants and termites hiding in nests. Their pink and hairless paws are very soft, similar to the palms of our hands, which help them walk quietly on the forest floor.

Sun bears can be found throughout Southeast Asia in Eastern India, Southern China, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Peninsular Malaysia, Sumatra and Borneo. There are two subspecies of sun bears in Malaysia – the Malayan

sun bear found in the Asian mainland and Sumatra, and the Bornean sun bear found only in Borneo. The Bornean sun bear is half the size of the Malayan sun bear, and scientists believe that this evolutionary adaptation was due to food shortages.

Every morning, I would wake up to the sound of my alarm at 6.45am, usually after a night of peaceful slumber. I would go about my usual routine of brushing my teeth, washing my face and having some breakfast before rushing off to catch the 7.30am shuttle bus that picked up volunteers for the 10-minute journey to BSBCC.

I would spend the early portion of the day either working in the kitchen chopping and weighing various fruits and vegetables or cleaning the bear houses, which can be strenuous for some people (like me) who don't have



Young volunteers of the BSBC

a lot of arm muscle. Later, at roughly 11am, we would feed the bears in the bear house and the outdoor enclosure.

Sun bears are omnivorous and consume a wide range of food, including fruits, insects, invertebrates, small animals and honey. Every day, they are fed a variety of food, such as papaya, bananas, carrots, fresh vegetables and coconuts, depending on the day's supply.

The afternoons were slower and more flexible, and this is the time when we would make enrichment for the bears. "Enrichment" is a term used to describe entertainment for the bears to keep them from feeling bored, which is also beneficial to them in various other aspects. Every day, they get an enrichment of some kind, whether it is a bouquet of ginger leaves with peanut butter in the middle, a bundle of sticks with hidden peanut butter or a grass ball with hidden fruits in the centre.

Another form of enrichment is banana leaves, which give the sun bears something to munch on and clean their teeth in the process. Every Wednesday, we would take a short drive to cut banana leaves from banana

trees on the roadside that do not belong to anyone or any plantation. After spending some time cutting and piling the leaves into the back of the car, we would stop to have some fresh coconut or rambutans!

I never expected to observe a health checkup for a sun bear. However, I was fortunate enough to be tasked with assisting a medical health checkup for Jelita, regularly recording her pulse and temperature



The first batch of RASMA volunteers celebrating with Dr Goodall



Each sun bear has its own unique chest mark to distinguish one from another

while the doctors treated a wound behind her ear.

What I did not realise prior to volunteering here is that sun bears can have different personalities and habits! Simone, the first bear you see as you enter the bear house, is always curious and loves observing everyone while they work. Sunbears, who is in the outdoor pens in the daytime, usually climbs up the tree when feeding time comes around.

Sun bears are essential to the rainforest and play four vital roles in preserving the rainforest:

Forest planter: As sun bears consume fruits, they disperse the fruit seeds throughout the forest as they travel, allowing for higher plant survival rate as the seed is planted further away from the parent tree.

Forest engineer: Their strong canine teeth and claws act as an important tool for sun bears to tear open tree trunks and reach for the honey within. The cavity created can then be used as a nesting site for other animals, such as hornbills and flying squirrels.

Forest doctors: Termites prey on both living and dead trees, and some

build their nests within a tree host, which can eventually kill the tree. As sun bears love termites, they dig into the trees and consume them, keeping the forest healthy by controlling termite population and keeping trees alive.

Forest farmers: When sun bears dig for earthworms, beetle grub and any other invertebrates, they help enhance the nutrient cycle in the forest by mixing the nutrient-rich and nutrient-poor soil together.

I also learned that sun bears are the least studied type of bear. Moreover, they are heavily poached as their bile and gallbladder are used in traditional Chinese medicine to cure ailments, although their efficacy has not been scientifically proven. In addition, they are targeted for their claws, canine teeth and skin for decorative purposes or kept captive in cages as pets. Therefore, there is a dire need to rescue sun bears from the pet trade and inhumane conditions. Hopefully, one day, after rehabilitation, they can regain their forest skills and return to the wild where they belong.

Although there are laws put in place to protect the sun bears, which

are classified as a “totally protected” species under the Sabah Wildlife Conservation Enactment of 1997, sun bears are still being poached, with little to no repercussions. Recently, the Malaysian government has attempted to amend the Wildlife Conservation Act of 2010 by introducing a mandatory jail sentence against individuals caught hunting wild animals illegally. Hopefully, this amendment will significantly reduce the number of animal poachers.

I did not know that mini zoos could also illegally house sun bears. One of the sun bears in the bear house was rescued from a mini zoo where the owners identified it as a panda, which gave rise to the sun bear’s name, Panda. Another issue I was not aware of was that the BSBCC could only rescue sun bears in Sabah but not those in the neighbouring state of Sarawak due to the Malaysian law.

The sun bears are also faced with the devastating effects of rainforest deforestation. Parts of the rainforest are being cleared to make way for oil palm plantations, causing an imbalance to the natural ecosystem due to the



Kee E-Lene, TP Lim, Dr Jane Goodall, Kelly Kok and Peter Ong at the EPF Social Well Being Agenda 2019

lack of plant variety and putting animals in danger. Sun bears and other animals, such as pygmy elephants, that accidentally wander into the rainforest can face the risk of getting caught or killed by poachers protecting their plantation from animals such as wild boars.

In my opinion, it is advisable to spend at least two to three weeks volunteering at the BSBCC to have an incredibly worthwhile time. You would be able to observe some of the sun bear's behavioural patterns and get a more in-depth understanding of them. I am so grateful that the RASMA programme encouraged me to volunteer for three weeks.

My experience at the BSBCC was exceptional and went above and beyond my initial expectations. I learned so much about the Bornean sun bears and the urgency and importance of conserving our shrinking rainforest.

My volunteering experience, as well as other volunteers' experiences, can be found on the BSBCC website: <https://www.bsbcc.org.my/volunteer-stories.html>. ■

ABOUT ROOTS AND SHOOTS MALAYSIA

Established in 2015, Roots and Shoots Malaysia is a youth organisation founded by Jane Goodall. Its primary goal is to instil hope and encourage the Malaysian youth to go beyond awareness and bring positive changes to their environment and communities. The Malaysian core team, comprising long-time RSGC Members Kee E Lene and T.P. Lim, Kelly Kok, Peter Ong and Abi Lim, works with a group of volunteers who are critical to the success of this NGO.

The service-based Roots and Shoots Malaysia Award (RASMA) is a volunteer programme that encourages youths to commit their time towards serving causes that are much bigger than themselves.

APPLY NOW TO VOLUNTEER!

RASMA 2020 is looking for youths aged 16 to 25 years old who are able to dedicate their time and energy to making an impact. There will be opportunities to learn about fieldwork, running

THE SUN BEARS NEED YOUR HELP!

As the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has a direct impact on tourism, the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre is facing serious challenges to raise sufficient funds to sustain its operations. The 43 rescued sun bears rely greatly on the generosity of the public for their food, enrichment and veterinary care, but especially more so during this critical time. If you would like to make a donation, please visit www.bsbcc.org.my or email info.bsbcc@gmail.com for more information.

sanctuaries, branding an NGO, organising projects, research work, policymaking and more. Participants can opt to volunteer for 45, 55 or 75 hours.

This year, RASMA has partnered with 18 government-linked, non-profit organisations and private corporations where youths can volunteer in various aspects of conservation work. They include the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre, Turtle Conservation Society of Malaysia, Perak State Park Corporation, EcoKnights, ERE Consulting Group Sdn Bhd, Gunung Mulu National Park and Khazanah Research Institute, among others. Yayasan Hasanah, an impact foundation of Khazanah Nasional, is RASMA's Community Partner.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the recruitment process for RASMA 2020 has been extended. For more information and the latest updates, please visit www.rootsandshootsaward.my. All volunteering work is scheduled for July to September 2020 but is subject to change.

RSGC Junior Lim Hui Wen went to Shanghai for boarding school at the age of 13 and is now studying Anthropology at University College London. She loves baking and travelling, and has recently found a passion for cooking. She has spent her past summers volunteering at turtle and sun bear sanctuaries.