A Sumatran tiger is the central focus, walking through a dense thicket of green bamboo and other tropical plants. The tiger's orange and black stripes are clearly visible, and it has a focused expression. The background is a soft-focus wall of green, creating a sense of being deep in a forest.

Sam Mittmerham joined Biosphere Expeditions on a volunteering project and research team deep in the forest on Sumatra, one of the largest islands in the Indonesian archipelago, home of the critically endangered Sumatran Tiger.

THE LAST REMAINING SUMATRAN TIGERS

“Not long ago”, whispers Febri as he crouches down on the dimly lit jungle floor. With his hand he outlines a faint track in the mud, and then lets his arm rise to trace the animal’s path between the towering trees. I realise he means the Sumatran tiger was here seconds ago and I feel a sense of excitement and fear. “Don’t worry”, Febri assures me with a smile, probably because the look on my face is uneasy. “They are not aggressive and humans are not on their menu,” he quips. I relax and stand in awe of this magnificent forest and of the Sumatran Tiger, a fascinating predator. We are in the Rimbang Baling Wildlife Sanctuary on Sumatra and Febri is part of the team working here.



My journey started a few days prior at Pekanbaru, a bustling city followed by a trip that took me past nothing but palm oil plantations for three hours.

Here on Sumatra, essentially every scrap of flat land has been converted into plantations. But, Rimbang Baling lies in mountains so steep and inaccessible that they are of no interest to the palm oil barons. Mountains where the jungle still rules, where there are no roads, only rivers and streams along which you can travel into the forest. The Sumatran Tiger is endemic to this region where giant sized trees guard the river, as they have done for what feels like thousands of years, their branches hanging over the green waters of the Subayang River, like cathedrals of nature, stirring something deep inside me, a visceral sensation of being part of the web of life.

The Forest is Alive

Gibbons sing their songs in the trees without revealing their location. Macaques perform their aerial acrobatics in the branches. Wild pigs stand on the banks of the river oblivious to our passing – (pigs are not hunted by the local Muslim population). A massive monitor lizard emerges from the water and wriggles onto the bank. One discovers here that green comes in a seemingly infinite number of hues – from the murky, muddy swirls of the river to the bright, clean colour of palm leaves.

It is in this forest that the Sumatran Tiger has taken refuge. The Rimang Baling Wildlife Sanctuary was established in 1984 and measures 1360 km2 comprising highland and mountain tropical rainforest ecosystems. Slopes vary and the highest elevation

is 1070 m. The sanctuary is a biodiversity hotspot and a known Sumatran Tiger breeding area. As such it has been classified as an all-important global priority tiger conservation area.

Although the outlook for tigers may often seem bleak, there are success stories. In well-managed areas with effective tiger monitoring and where local communities are educated and included in economic benefit through expeditions, it may be the turning point. This is the reason that Biosphere Expeditions, a non-profit conservation organisation, together with WWF Indonesia, has established this expedition in Sumatra.

WWF Indonesia asked Biosphere Expeditions for assistance with tiger monitoring and to act as a showcase for how responsible, low-impact tiger tourism activities can generate local jobs and build capacity. My being

here in the jungle is the result and I’m on the first group of the inaugural expedition.

Searching for the Tigers

We rise at dawn and set off in small teams and venture into the forest. It is hot and humid. We walk along dappled pathways and through dense vegetation and climb the steep hills in search of signs of tiger.

A boat ride to a remote community brings welcome relief from the heat. The visit’s purpose is to talk to one of the community members about information and a mobile phone image of a tiger track in a tree plantation received the day prior. The hope is that we will be able to find the location and set up a camera to monitor the area.

Wherever we go, small crowds gather. The team of volunteers include people from around the world. There’s Tessa, a designer from California; Manuela, a health worker from Germany; Peter, a retired administrator from the UK; Michael, working in IT from Australia; and another Peter of Dutch/South African descent; and the Indonesian scientist from WWF. Despite our different backgrounds and ages, we mould into a team, united by our common goals and interests in wildlife.

The green hills are steep and hard work. Easier access is provided by the myriad of streams that cut through the

steep mountains around us. It is cool and shaded down here. Butterflies skirt the clear air. A wild pig crosses the river 20 metres behind us, with one eye on us and the other on the path ahead. We have a wildlife ranger with us - there are only four for the huge sanctuary. He documents illegal logging that we come across which we later learn, resulted in arrests.

The team follow the bends of the stream, wading, and sometimes climbing over logs. Some of us opt to swim instead. Deeper and deeper we get into the forest, documenting tracks in the mud and sand, scratch marks on the trees - made by the Malaysian sun bear and the tiger - setting camera traps in promising locations in the woods.

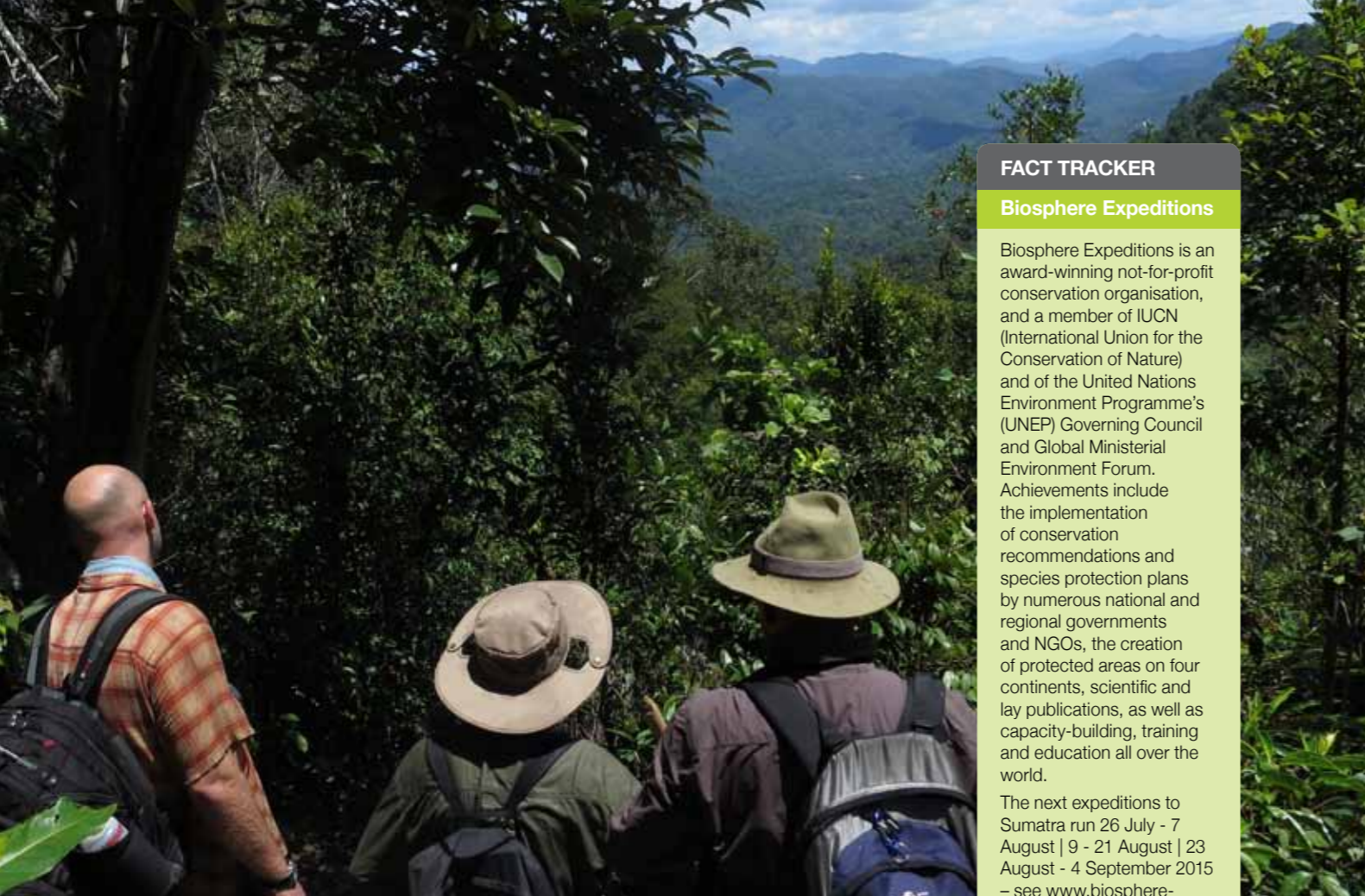
It is a long, hot, wet and exhilarating day. At the end of it, we reach a stone bowl where the stream cascades down the rocks, power-showering us with cool water, creating rainbows where the sunlight penetrates the canopy above, bathing the forest in spray and colour. There is soft green moss everywhere. It’s an enchanted place and in our hearts we are certain we are the first foreigners to see it.

As the sun sets, camera traps hold a silent vigil in the forest. We fall asleep hoping that the cameras will take photographs of the tigers that pass through the forest - photographs that will contribute to the research that will see the survival of the exquisite Sumatran Tiger.

About the Sumatran Tiger

- The Sumatran Tiger (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*) is endemic to Sumatra, one of the largest islands in the Indonesian archipelago.
- The smallest of all of the tiger subspecies and is distinguished by heavy black stripes on its orange coat.
- Listed in IUCN’s Critically Endangered category, there are probably fewer than 300 left in the wild. As a top predator, the tiger needs large joined-up forest blocks to thrive, and used to roam across the island. It now occurs in isolated populations, its habitats having been drastically reduced by clearings for agriculture, plantations and settlements.
- Habitat destruction forces the tiger into settled areas in search of food, where it is more likely to come into contact - and conflict - with people.
- Poaching is another very potent threat. Studies have estimated that up to 78% of Sumatran tiger deaths, consisting of about 40 animals per year, are as a result of poaching, either as retaliatory killings or to feed the demand for tiger parts. Despite increased efforts in tiger conservation - including law enforcement and anti-poaching capacity - a substantial market remains in Sumatra and the rest of Asia for tiger parts and products.





FACT TRACKER

Biosphere Expeditions

Biosphere Expeditions is an award-winning not-for-profit conservation organisation, and a member of IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and of the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Governing Council and Global Ministerial Environment Forum. Achievements include the implementation of conservation recommendations and species protection plans by numerous national and regional governments and NGOs, the creation of protected areas on four continents, scientific and lay publications, as well as capacity-building, training and education all over the world.

The next expeditions to Sumatra run 26 July - 7 August | 9 - 21 August | 23 August - 4 September 2015 – see www.biosphere-expeditions.org/sumatra for details and prices. Everyone can take part and there are no age limits or special skills requirements to join. Other projects include leopard of the Western Cape, marsupials in Australia, snow leopards in Kyrgyzstan, reef surveys in the Maldives, Oman and Malaysia and many more – www.biosphere-expeditions.org.

INDONESIA

Indonesia is an archipelago comprising approximately 17,000 islands, only 8,000 of which are inhabited. It encompasses 34 provinces with over 238 million people, making it the world's fourth most populous country. Sumatra is one of the biggest islands of the archipelago. Indonesia's size, tropical climate, and archipelagic geography support the world's second highest level of biodiversity (after Brazil) and Indonesia is second only to Australia in terms of total endemic species.



TOP TEN TIPS on choosing a wildlife volunteering experience

These days it is hard to find a worthwhile volunteering experience that achieves tangible benefits. The market is full of profit-driven, unscrupulous operators, which do little for local wildlife at best and are harmful to it, and local communities, at worst. Biosphere Expeditions was amongst a group of experts in volunteering, wildlife conservation and protection to develop pointers to provide practical help to those looking to choose a holiday or gap year experience that was going to be beneficial not only for themselves, but also for the wildlife and communities that they would encounter. www.biosphere-expeditions.org/toptentips.