

This summer I had the once in a lifetime opportunity to go on a 4-week expedition to Indonesia, working as a marine research assistant with Operation Wallacea. Operation Wallacea is an organisation that runs biological and conservation management research programmes in remote locations across the world. Excited and nervous, I boarded the first plane to the Coral Triangle, the very region in which Alfred Russel Wallace had made many of his invaluable observations. Forty-eight hours and four flights later, I finally arrived on Buton; an island situated in South East Sulawesi. During my first week I undertook an important Reef Survey Technique course. Through the three daily lectures, I learned to identify over 200 marine organisms and their attributes in great detail, as well as learning about their habitat, reef ecology and protection mechanisms. With a persistent jetlag this was a challenging task but most rewarding. Nothing compares to the experience of spotting organisms in their natural habitat during the daily dives. Very memorable was my first sighting of a juvenile pufferfish sleeping on a soft coral. These encounters became part of my daily routine and turned every dive into a new adventure. During the dives in such a rich and dense marine habitat I furthermore learned various techniques on how to best survey the abundance of organisms underwater.

During my second week on Buton, I entered the monitoring team, where I applied my newly acquired skills and knowledge to actively contribute towards Opwall's conservation efforts. The team is an integral part in collecting the data needed to establish a marine protected area around the Opwall site on Buton. Throughout the week, I learned how to process and analyse the raw data in the dry lab, after collecting it during our two daily morning dives. This included several hours of analysing stereo-video data to assess fish abundance. Without Wi-Fi and only weak cellular data upcoming questions had to be solved via the traditional way using reference books or conferring with the other scientists and staff on site. This probably took longer than simply typing a question into google but often sparked interesting discussions among our group. It was a beneficial/rewarding week as my skills as a diver and scientist were constantly put to the test, affording me the opportunity to improve and reiterate what I learned in the first week.

The two weeks on South Buton flew by and it was time to be heading off in the middle of the night with a group of students to the second Opwall site. Two ferries brought us to the astonishingly beautiful Island of Hoga, situated in the Wakatobi national park. The marine research centre on Hoga is Operation Wallacea's flagship, with a marine protected area having been established there in 1996. Stripped of all modern conveniences, including running water and air conditioning, I quickly adapted to the new setting and fell in love with the way of life on the remote island: living in a traditional wooden hut on stilts, recycling waste and minimising water consumption in order to protect the beautiful environment. As a research assistant, I helped dissertation students gather data for their different projects ranging from behavioural studies of anemone fish to ecological studies on coral and sponge association. During those dives and snorkels, I was struck by how more abundant the fish and corals were on Hoga than around Buton. This was proof of the positive effect of a marine protected area on the fish and coral population.

In my final week, I had the opportunity to embrace Indonesian culture and learn about locals' livelihood, fishing practices and beliefs. A memorable experience was the visit to a fishing village near Hoga where local fishermen started seaweed farming, which can be used to produce agar and provides an alternative income source to fishing. This was an eye opening experience which

demonstrated to me that there is so much more to conservation than conducting research and introducing fishing quotas.

The expedition was an incredibly rewarding experience. It left me with an increased breath of scientific and practical skills, a close insight into field research, a multitude of academic knowledge and an intensified love for the ocean and its inhabitants. The people I met in Indonesia sparked my passion for protecting these unique habitats. I would therefore like to thank Pembroke College for the contribution towards the expedition cost, enabling me to partake in this amazing project.