

Tour takes students out of comfort zone

Report on Sarawak forestry study tour - 2005

The seven students found themselves *way* out of their comfort zone as we landed in Kuala Lumpur; despite it being late in the evening, the temperature was 38 degrees C and the humidity stood at 100%, the students were jet-lagged and tired and cranky after the excitement and then the longest flight they'd ever made in their lives, and most of the conversations they heard around them were *not* in English.

What has become an annual series of formal forestry study tours to Sarawak, Malaysia, began in 2001 with a tour organised by Dr. Nora Devoe of the NZ School of Forestry and Mr. Barney Chan and Dr. Peter Kho of the Sarawak Timber Association (STA). Barney and Peter are stalwart Canterbury alumni who have maintained strong ties with Canterbury over the years. A second tour was arranged 2002, and while 2003 was missed because of SARS, subsequent tours were conducted in 2004 and now again this year, always in the break between semesters.

Our host in-country is the Sarawak Timber Association, an umbrella organisation for over 300 wood producing companies in Sarawak, from silvicultural contractors to plywood mills. They provide a connection to a kind of forestry not otherwise seen by Canterbury forestry and forest engineering students: tropical vs temperate forests, logging of native species rather than plantation exotics, 300+ commercial species rather than just two or three, and labour intensive forest operations vs capital intensive operations.

Students who participate in the study tour are all volunteers. The tour is not connected with any course, affords the students no formal credit, and must be completely self funded.

A considerable amount of time is needed to prepare for such a study tour. The main preoccupations in weekly meetings are developing a study tour theme, fund raising, and background preparation including learning about subjects ranging from Sarawak's culture and aspects of its national forestry effort, to immunisation for overseas trips.

It takes some time to whittle the large number of students first just generally interested in the idea of a tour down to a small, committed group. It is truly a chicken-and-egg problem, as the students are reluctant to commit the required time, energy and expense to the project until they are certain the tour will indeed go ahead and that it will not cost them personally a great deal – but of course the tour does not become a certainty until a dedicated core of students emerges and begins fundraising in earnest. This year, we began with 15 or 20 students, and ended up with a committed group of seven, comprising six undergraduates and one postgraduate. Only one had ever been any farther from home than Sydney prior to the tour.

Students on the 2004 study tour set out to learn about tropical forestry, making that the theme of their tour. However, they soon learned that that was far too shallow, and that there was much more to learn beyond "straight" forest science and forest engineering, including aspects of culture, and very importantly, certification and marketing.

Sarawak sawmills must cope with vast numbers of commercial species, and very large piece sizes.



Based on that experience, the students on the 2005 tour adopted Certification and Global Marketing as their theme. However, again a shift in perceived priority occurred during this year's study tour, and by the end of it, the students were much more deeply influenced by the social implications of industrial forestry in Sarawak.

To intensify the study, focus the discussions, provide a knowledgeable student to initiate questions when touring each facility in-country, and to provide the knowledge to underpin an open post-tour seminar, each student takes on the responsibility for a "portfolio". Portfolio responsibilities for 2005 ranged from the forest resource, and soils and geology, through the system of government, to forest product certification and marketing.

The costs for the tour run to about \$2500 per student, well beyond what most students are in a position to cover personally. Therefore, a fundraising effort was mounted. A polished marketing approach was adopted, including developing a "brand" for promotions via a brochure and T-shirts. A list of contacts was researched and drawn up. Companies and agencies were contacted with a multifaceted approach including initial and follow-up telephone calls, and delivery of a printed brochure explaining the tour's goal and objectives.

Sponsorship totalling \$15,500 was generously provided by the following (in alphabetical order):

- Christchurch City Council
- Ernslaw One Ltd. (repeat sponsor)
- Selwyn Plantation Board (repeat sponsor)

Sponsorship came in the form of grants or paid work, including seedling planting, inventory work, and pruning. As has become the practice, a study tour T-shirt was designed, using the tour's branding, to visibly and widely

Tree nursery work is labour intensive despite heat and humidity.



expose the sponsors' logos while students were overseas. Messrs. Chan and Kho and the STA staff put a great deal of thought, time and effort into the study tours, and the Association provides considerable support in kind. The School covers all expenses incurred by the faculty member responsible for the students, except the in-country costs, which he funded personally.

The itinerary for the study tours is unique each year, capitalising on the different opportunities that arise, and

*The Grand Perfect Co. has launched a large scale replanting programme using *Acacia mangium*.*



they are always designed to expose students to all aspects of forestry in a tropical country, including:

- *culture*: tours of Kuching Museum and Sarawak Cultural Village, Kuching Sunday market, boat trip to Bukit Sarang village, boat trip from Bako Jetty to Bako National Park, numerous "hawker stall" meals
- *social aspects*: employment of migrant labour in mills, viewing migrant labourer accommodation and camp
- *flora and fauna*: two-night stay, day-long tramp, and night walk in Bako National Park; visit to Semenggoh Wildlife Refuge Park (home of orangutans); boat trip to Bukit Sarang village
- *forest operations*: harvest sites and forest re-establishment, two-night stay at forest nursery
- *mill tours*: sawmill, plywood mill, charcoal briquette mill plus extensive briefings by STA staff, government Forestry Department staff, and staff of the Sarawak Timber Industry Development Corporation, all in STA's corporate meeting facility. Students spent roughly half their time in hotel accommodation in Kuching, with the other half in hostel or camp accommodation "up-country".

Before and again following the study tour, the students each delivered short presentations within two lunch time seminars open to all students and staff and the public. The pre-tour presentations exposed the students' understanding of their portfolios prior to going on tour, and the post-tour presentations provided an opportunity to present their updated understanding. In addition, for the first time this year, they provided a presentation on forestry in New Zealand to STA staff while in Kuching.

The complete package made for the trip of a lifetime for each student. They've brought home many warm memories of the hospitality offered them by STA staff, and a great deal of food for thought within their growing professional lives.

And the knowledge that they've *twice* survived being well out of their comfort zone now: first when entering Malaysia, and then again returning home from the tropics to mid-winter cold and damp in Christchurch.

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