

Wilson studies members of the resident population of long-tailed macaques on Tinjil Island, Indonesia. (photo by Fransica Vidal Garcia)



Monkey Business

Ayla Wilson '14 thought she wanted to be a lawyer when she started her coursework at Coastal Georgia. Instead, she will graduate in May with a B.S. in psychology and plans for graduate school in animal behavior and neuroscience.

“Examining your life draws you to psychology as you try to make sense of what you’ve seen and experienced,” she said. But it was her abiding interest in the great apes and monkeys and the opportunity to be mentored by Dr. Karen Hambright, a primatologist and Professor of Psychology at Coastal, that influenced her choice of major.

“There’s something they have that we, as humans, have lost. I feel my place in the world with them,” she explained. “This isn’t anthropomorphism – I don’t want a chimp in the house. But they have a consistent innocence, they communicate, they express emotions and they build relationships. I want to understand that better.”

Last summer she received a Foundation scholarship, funded by Dr. and Mrs. Joel Drew, to attend the 35th annual meeting of the American Society of Primatologists with Dr. Hambright in Sacramento, CA, where doors of opportunity began to open. She made many connections, such as Dr. Kimberley Phillips, cognitive neuroscientist and Associate Professor of Psychology at Trinity University in San Antonio, TX, and Dr. James Else, Associate Professor of Pathology (now retired) at Emory University in Atlanta, who invited Wilson to visit the Yerkes National Primate Research Center Field

Station during fall term 2012.

Dr. Hambright also introduced her to Dr. Randy Kyes, a renowned research professor at the University of Washington in Seattle and director of the Center for Global Field Study. Dr. Kyes is also a core scientist at the Washington National Primate Research Center and has established collaborative field training

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programs in conservation biology and global health in Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh, China, Thailand, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico and India. They discussed the possibility of Wilson’s attending his field school in late summer 2013 on Tinjil Island, Indonesia, where she would learn the essentials of field work, conduct a research project observing long-tailed macaques in their natural habitat, study with Dr. Kyes and an international cohort of scientists and students, and engage in an international community service-learning project.

The 18th Annual International Field Study Program (IFSP) in Indonesia, organized by the Center for Global Field Study at the University of Washington, is

an interdisciplinary education program and collaboration with the Pusat Studi Satwa Primata (Primate Research Center) at Bogor Agricultural University in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. The program, funded by small grants, private donations and student fees, is designed to provide field-based educational training and research for students and scientists interested in conservation biology, animal behavior, primatology, environmental science and global health at a unique intersection of human, wildlife and environmental interfaces. The field study also provides cultural-exchange and service-learning opportunities.

The Republic of Indonesia is an archipelago of approximately 17,508 islands grouped in Southeast Asia and Oceania. Tinjil Island is located off the south coast of Banten. A mixture of lowland tropical rainforest and coastal beach vegetation, the island is surrounded by a coral reef and inhabited by rats, bats, crustaceans, insects, monitor lizards, pythons and a primate population of over 1,300 free-ranging long-tailed macaque monkeys. The environment is remote and challenging.

Wilson was one of 13 students, only three of whom were from the U.S., selected to participate in the field study from August 15 through September 10, 2013.

“When I received my acceptance in March from Dr. Kyes, I couldn’t believe it was really happening. In fact, it wouldn’t have without the help of my family, the College and mentors like Steven Mansfield and Dr. Hambright,” she recalled. “I was



Above A map of Indonesia. The red star indicates Tinjil Island



Right: An older orangutan orphan wraps arms around Wilson. (photo courtesy of Ayla Wilson)

Opposite Right: Wilson meets her first working elephant. (photo courtesy of Ayla Wilson)

Opposite Left: Dr. Randall C. Kyes, Research Professor and Director of the Center for Global Field Study, with Wilson at the Tinjil Island field site. (photo by Dr. Pensri Kyes)

going to have this incredible opportunity to learn how to conduct research in the field with a highly respected primatologist – an experience that would help me get into graduate programs and further my knowledge in research methods. I am so grateful.”

Although the field study meant a delayed start to her regular coursework for fall semester, she will receive academic credits and service-learning credit for the research trip under a special topics course. Wilson, who was one of the inaugural recipients of a service-learning scholarship her junior year at Coastal, serves on the Community Outreach Student Committee and as a student representative on the College’s Service-Learning Advisory Committee. She received an Excellence in Service Learning Student Award in April.

Global service-learning is essential to the programs Dr. Kyes has designed as a way of giving back to the host communities. For the Indonesia field study, the program includes educating the local 4th and 5th graders about the importance of their “backyard” – the habitat and the creatures which share it with them. “Dr. Kyes has had children whom he and his students educated in years past return to the field school as university students in their own country and in GFSP field study programs in other habitat countries and pursue graduate careers in global conservation and health,” Dr. Hambright noted.

Wilson and her field study team members spent a concentrated four days preparing the all-day outreach education program for the local children. “The relationship with the community, our base

camp at a fishing village which is 1 ½ hours by boat from Tinjil, and with the village schools is highly collaborative. Part of what makes this program work is that Dr. Kyes and his team of collaborators have made it a priority to maintain long-term relationships with the people living in these communities. They have returned year after year, doing what they said they were going to do. This is important in designing effective programs that foster change because trust and commitments to shared goals are essential in building lasting relationships that generate positive change. We were greeted with warm enthusiasm. The children get to know us through singing and dancing with them, so our own cultural education started with an exchange – learning their school songs!” Wilson said. “We hosted about 100 kids and three teachers. Our focus was simple



conservation biology using lots of pictures. Following the discussion, which was presented in their dialect, we interacted in small groups as the children drew their own pictures, reflecting their concerns about their environment. Dr. Kyes has been doing this for 23 years, so he has helped to educate multiple generations about protecting their assets – their own backyards. Consistently planting those seeds of change – that habitat destruction and conflict with the wildlife for limited resources isn't their only option – is transitional. They see it doesn't have to be that way. Educating children, who then grow up to educate the next generation, eventually changes attitudes."

Wilson summed it up, "This trip gave me a new outlook on just how big our world is and that there are people who care about protecting it, not only for our

future but for the next generations because we are all in this together."

Her cohort for the field study included American, Indonesian and Mexican graduate and undergraduate students. Working in discussion groups, they explored the human impact on habitat, alternative energy sources, climate change, allocation of resources, pathogen vectors and sustainability. "Dr. Kyes stressed the importance of scientific research and for us to look at the 'big picture' in conservation biology. Our goal is not only to investigate how organisms interact with the environment, but as scientists, we must become better educators. We have a responsibility to make our findings public knowledge.

"The material was translational rather than species-specific," she continued. "The emphasis was connectivity. The

work and research were hard, but I have a new confidence, especially after acquiring skills such as anesthetic darting with a blow gun and using radio telemetry and GPS for tracking.

"Graduate school acceptance is contingent on more than grades. Commitment, focus, openness to new experiences, in-depth research, contacts and curiosity – these are also part of the equation," she observed. "It's not just about intensely studying orangutans or macaques. But you know, I think I could have stayed in the field for the rest of my life. It was that absorbing."

Wilson will be applying for additional field study opportunities with Dr. Kyes. She has also been invited to work with Dr. Phillips at the neuroscience lab at Trinity University this summer, following graduation in May. 📍