

Ask the Expert: Interview with Duika Burges-Watson

- Questions posed by students from Bohunt School, Liphook, Hampshire

Were there scary bits to the expedition?

“Many! For so many different reasons. The earthquakes and rough seas were scary as you worried for your safety. The setbacks were scary as it meant that we might not finish the study. And the changes to the plan were scary from a budget point of view, especially the need to have a support boat all the time.”

Do you see it as a success?

“Absolutely. The study on seaweed farming is of high quality, the experience was fantastic and the benefits of us being in the area are ongoing; we sold the kayaks to a resort so that they could start sea kayaking tourism (a German company has now taken that resort on as their kayaking base meaning sustained income). And Lena is going back out to teach First Aid.”

What can we do about their way of life from here?

“Number one, act to help reduce the impacts of climate change. Number two, be interested in where your food comes from.”

How are people there connected?

“Everyone has a phone. They use them for taking photos, accessing the internet and generally being connected. From the expedition we have a huge Facebook following, which is fantastic as it allows us to have ongoing conversations with the people we met.”

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Hugging-the-Coast/488745574476886>

How did you do it?

“We travelled by kayak as we needed them to get across the reefs to gain access to the communities we wanted to talk to; often the kayaks had to be used to get food for the support boat. The kayaks also made a connection and sparked curiosity; they started conversations and challenged gender issues, as the coastal communities weren’t used to seeing women doing these types of activities. The women were interested in us and the men were interested in the boats.”

“Once we reached the communities we wanted to talk to we set up workshops where we could interview the key people in the village and the key people involved in seaweed farming. Our top tips for running successful workshops would be:

- Do establish a rapport with the people before asking your questions.
- Respect the people and be nice to them ... even if you’re tired, hungry, behind schedule etc.
- Ask them, don’t try and get them to say what you want
- Relax and be honest
- Improvise and embrace error!”

“Once back home we then analysed the interviews in order to put detail to the perceptions and views we gained whilst out there.”

Why did you do it?

We were interested in the lives and livelihoods of the archipelago’s liminal zones, particularly the role of seaweed farming in rural development. We wanted to explore the region as a team of women, by sea kayak.

We wanted to investigate seaweed farming for a number of reasons. Firstly, this is one of my areas of expertise. The expedition built on my previous research looking at seaweed as a community development strategy and public health commodity. Ten years earlier, I researched seaweed farming around Bali and eastern Indonesia, finding that it had really transformed local economies. I’ve also long been interested in how seaweed farming is an industry that is traditionally dominated by women, though we found that that wasn’t the case in the Sangihe archipelago, where entire families would be involved.

We wanted to see how seaweed farming was faring in a part of Indonesia that was different in almost every way: remote from major population and tourism centres, volcanic and rugged geography, predominantly Christian rather than Muslim communities.

Hugging the Coast was also about a team of women undertaking a research expedition by sea kayak. For Johanna, as someone who's done a fair number of wilderness expeditions in different places around the world, she was keen to see what difference it makes when human beings are as much a part of the environment and landscape as, say, the sea or the mountains. We also wanted to demonstrate that in-depth sociological research can be undertaken through the expedition medium, and that 'how' we do research matters, e.g. the difference the kayaks made to the research practice and outcomes.