



BORNEO AGAINEO

- Grant Gartrell

Brian, Merry and Glenda Connor and a little tree



We had been thinking about it for a few years. Borneo sounded like a really interesting place to visit. We told ourselves that we must get serious about it one of these days. Then one day at Naracoorte there were a lot of speeches and reminiscences and good wishes for the future, because Brian Clark (former ACKMA President) and his wife Sue were about to embark on a major lifestyle change. After Brian had cut his teeth on Naracoorte National Park's induction into World Heritage status, they were off to Borneo to manage Mulu National Park, which is equally deserving of its recently acquired World Heritage status.

That certainly stirred us up to think about visiting Borneo sooner rather than later, but time has a habit of slipping by more rapidly than you might think, so recently we came to the twin conclusions that Mulu must be pretty good because the Clarks have been up there a while, and that if we want to

see it before Brian hits retirement age we'd better not procrastinate for too many more decades.

In August with wife Merry and friend and neighbour Glenda Connor I took off for Borneo for a 16 day holiday with a difference. Who knows much about Borneo? We certainly didn't. Borneo is a large island in the South China Sea split into four sections, Sarawak and Sabah which are Malaysian, Kalimantan which is part of Indonesia, and independent Brunei whose Sultan happens to be the second richest man in the world.

Planning the itinerary was interesting. When I insisted on six nights at Mulu, Merry was a little apprehensive. She imagined herself and Glenda sitting around looking at their watches while I vanished down a hole in the ground for days on end. When I said "Trust me", she told me that she had been raised never to trust people who said "Trust me." In the end I got my way, and things worked out fine. When it was time to leave, Merry would quite happily have mislaid her plane ticket for another week or two, or perhaps a month or so, or possibly a year or three, and I wasn't in all that much of a hurry to get out of the place, either.

We flew to Kuala Lumpur first, did a quick city tour which included Batu Caves, for which no words are truly adequate (I've had religious experiences in caves before but this...), and then quickly got back on an aircraft, thank goodness, as we were there when the smoke from fires in Sumatra was thick and acrid and irritated our eyes and throats. The schools were closed and many people wore masks. Yuk!

Tourists (with Brian Clark standing at the rear) awaiting the bat exodus from Deer Cave



We flew to Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, and luckily – no smoke. Kuching means cat in Malay and there were statues and sculptures of cats everywhere. Our hotel was on the Sarawak River and late afternoon saw practice dragon boat races by the local teams, as well as thunder storms that left as suddenly as they came, lasting only long enough to drench us to the skin.

A visit to the Cultural Village to see all the different tribal longhouses and lifestyles was really interesting. I did well trying out the blowpipe, for a beginner, but if I was hunting with a blowpipe to survive I would soon be able to slip through some of those squeezes I started to get stuck in thirty years ago! We then went to Sarawak's orangutan rehabilitation park and were in luck when the big alpha male came crashing through the trees to get some bananas. We saw about 8 apes and the pecking order was clear. They all waited for the big male to finish before they started. Wonder where I went wrong?



Brian Clark at entrance to Wind Cave

Two further plane rides took us up the coast from Kuching to Miri and then into the Sarawak jungle and Mulu National Park. As we flew it became obvious looking down that the inland Sarawak road system was quite different from the one we left behind. In Australia the country roads are generally graded dirt or bitumen, with or without potholes and corrugations. In Sarawak the inland highways are most commonly made of water. An incredible network of serpentine waterways weaves its way across the country, descending slowly from the mountains to the sea. Only half an hour by air, our final leg from Miri to Mulu would have been a more leisurely 10 hour journey by boat.

As we approached Mulu in the aircraft my pulse quickened as it does every time I catch sight of limestone landscapes. Rising out of the jungle were a number of spectacular mountains and bluffs with a scattering of dazzling white vertical escarpments that seemed to be calling my name.

Crossing the tarmac at Mulu airport it was really nice to see Brian waiting for us. I'm sure he must still have a suit and a tie hanging up somewhere, but he obviously carefully chose the casual tropical look to make us feel at home. He must have known how much luggage we had already accumulated, because he thoughtfully brought the ute. Ten minutes later we were introduced to our accommodation for the next week, modern self contained rooms in longhouse style with ceiling fans and windows that open to let the jungle sounds in at night. We went to sleep with geckos running around inside and out hunting insects and saying "chuck, chuck, chuck," while outside the frogs were very noisy asking "What, what, what?" Walking through the jungle in the day time was quiet, but at night it was show time!

Kings Chamber in Wind Cave



While I have to save up some superlatives for the caves I cannot help using up a heap of them in describing the Park Headquarters area. From the minute we arrived it was obvious that it was well groomed and well managed: a great place to spend some quiet time in a setting rivaling any botanic garden. Although it was possible to find meals outside the Park we were well looked after for breakfast, lunch and dinner by the "Café Mulu" and we never got tired of eating there. Eating was certainly very affordable for Australians and amongst the well balanced and tasty predominantly Asian style menu there was even the choice of hamburger and chips, although I didn't eat it often because the other choices were too nice. The Park itself is a dry area, but just a short walk across the bridge over the river next to the Headquarters office are a number of bars. A pleasant place to spend an hour at the end of the day, we never made it further than the closest one, because John, the proprietor, was so hospitable.

There were either boardwalks or the river to reach the various show caves in the park, with some much longer trek style adventures available for the more athletic. A couple of the boardwalks are around 3.5km in length, and that's a lot of planks to keep in good repair, and keep swept clean, up to 3 times per week. The boats are of a traditional design, long and narrow, powered by outboard motors and manned by two people, one to operate the motor and the other to sit in the front of the boat with a pole to negotiate rapids and fend off rocks and floating logs. We really loved going up and down the rivers in them. One day we were invited by Brian and Sue to visit a village 40 minutes upstream where tourists don't usually go.

On the way we stopped and the men hacked their way through the jungle as they had found some pitcher plants that Sue wanted to grow in the park headquarters garden so that visitors could see them. We then went on to the village, wet and slightly dirty from our trek in the jungle, to be greeted very formally by the head man and his wife! From a range of crafts that were displayed expressly for our benefit I bought a wooden wok scraper with a bird of paradise carved on the handle, along with a few woven table mats and other items that would pack in a suitcase. I see the bird of paradise in my kitchen every day and I'm instantly back in the village wishing that I could have bought much more because they had all worked so hard making it.

Another day we visited, also by boat, the local school. It has about 100 students and 80 of them are boarders. Malaysia is encouraging all native people to educate their children and there is a great enthusiasm for learning and immense pride in their school. The high boarding rate (from age 6) is because their communities are scattered all over and deep into the jungle with sometimes a 3 – 6 day trek to reach them. It would do any of our kids who don't appreciate their educational opportunities a power of good to see how much the Mulu students appreciated theirs. It impressed me deeply and I wish them well.

By the time we were several days into the visit it was becoming quite obvious that there wasn't a mosquito to be found to justify the yukky tasting malaria medication we were regularly consuming. Come to think of it, there weren't any flies either. Could this have anything to do with the huge numbers of hungry bats flying out of nearby Deer Cave every evening?

It had to happen sooner or later. I'm going to have to use some of those superlatives on the caves. But just before I do that, I'd better spend a few on Brian's new treetop adventure, or canopy walk. A round trip of about half a kilometre of narrow single file suspension bridges strung between huge trees way, way up, with periodic viewing platforms and interpretive signage, and not a nail to be seen. Slightly scary at the best of times, and normally not to be missed, it is no place to be when the wind gets up. When two trees start swaying in the wind, the bridge in between can act as a catapult. Luckily we visited it on a calm day.

Now for the caves. I have to start by saying that Mulu is home to the mighty Sarawak Chamber, reputedly the largest cave chamber in the World. I didn't get to see it. Brian pointed out that it takes several underground hours to get there, and unless you can take enough lighting, even once you are there you still won't see it. I decided to save my little Pelican light for something a lot smaller, so I went to check out Deer Cave.

There must have been something wrong with my torch, because it didn't have much effect on Deer Cave either, but luckily daylight penetrated a fair way in. I think Deer Cave was probably quite a large cave, but there seemed to be something wrong with my brain as well. It was having real trouble making sense of what my eyes were seeing.



Boardwalk engineering on the way to Clearwater Cave

Group of bats flying donuts in the Deer Cave entrance before heading out to feed.



Brian told us that a French film crew actually used a hot air balloon inside the chamber to get up near the roof for some interesting shots, and that even he was surprised to see how small the balloon looked when it was floating around near the ceiling about 100 metres up. What an amazing place! I like gazing at the stars at night, but cannot do so for long without starting to feel really small and insignificant. Deer Cave has much the same effect. Come to think of it, I never did get to see the more than forty Jumbo Jets they said would fit in the cave at the same time. Now that would be a sight with which my delicate little brain could not cope!

I thought that I had better save what was left of my sanity and have a look at a cave of more modest dimensions. Apparently there was one called Clearwater Cave and another called Wind Cave which is part of the same system on the other side of the Park Headquarters. Feeling a bit lazy by this time we forsook the boardwalk for a pleasant boat ride up the river, saw some highly decorated chambers in Wind, climbed the two hundred and eighty odd steps up to the Clearwater Cave entrance and saw some really nice large scale but comprehensible cave passage, including a substantial underground river.

That was fine, until Brian laid out the map on his desk and we saw what a tiny little corner of the whole was occupied by the developed sections of the cave. To date a succession of British based expeditions have mapped 120km of this amazing system, and by the look of it, for most of it they could have traveled sideways in a London double decker bus.

When it all too quickly became time to say goodbye to Mulu we left knowing that we had been privileged to see something really special. Brian and Sue really care for their staff, and indeed the whole community, and the feelings are obviously reciprocated.

In one sense it is obviously a hard job to do and almost all consuming because to do it well they have to give so much of themselves, to be so involved without being compromised. They clearly do this sincerely and willingly, and the rewards are obvious with highly motivated and well trained staff taking great pride in what is undoubtedly one of the World's truly outstanding places. In another sense it is obviously a hard job to give up, because it would be a truly difficult act to follow. It is not

only the staff that are highly motivated. Brian and Sue obviously feel a great responsibility to their community. I salute them.

While the ladies flew on for a quick visit to Brunei, I stayed on in Miri, so that Brian could catch up with me and come with me for a quick look at Niah Caves, in another large outcrop of limestone a couple of hours by road down the coast. By this time I had become quite inured to spectacular caves so I was not altogether surprised by the amazing scale of Niah Great Cave.

I was, however, completely humbled by the bird nesters who worked in there scaling a network of flimsy wood and bamboo poles and ropes swinging precariously 60 metres or more above the floor, to harvest swiftlet nests (from which is extracted saliva used to make birds nest soup) their only concession to modern technology appearing to be that they had replaced their guttering candles by modest LED cap lamps. At one stage in the fascinating history of this cave the government had attempted to exclude them by building 5 metre high wrought iron barricades across the entrances. What a futile exercise!

Niah was interesting to visit for other reasons. Brian later confessed that he was somewhat ambivalent about our visit because although the cave is amazing, and has evidence of human occupation for the last 30,000 to 40,000 years he was prepared to be embarrassed by the amount of refuse left behind by the modern day visitors. As he described to me the heaps of rubbish he saw on his last visit, it reminded me of what many Australian country roads used to be like, marked out with a continuous line of beer bottles. As it turned out, on this occasion we were pleasantly surprised.

The Niah Great Cave was as clean as a whistle. A great deal of work had recently been carried out to make it that way, and it was wonderful to see. Congratulations are due to the Niah management for this effort. As well as the restoration of the caves themselves, work is under way on repairs to the long and somewhat slippery boardwalk to the cave, replacing rotten planks. It is going to be a big job to restore that boardwalk to the condition of those at Mulu, and it makes me appreciate better the maintenance effort that Brian and his staff have put in at Mulu, but at least the job has begun.



Brian in Trader Cave – Niah Caves
– on path to Niah Great Cave.

While I was inspecting Niah Caves, Merry and Glenda nipped into Brunei for the day, and were equally impressed. Merry reported back: "The mosque there built by the present Sultan has to be one of the modern wonders of the world. We donned black robes and were taken in for a look at this incredibly beautiful building. The architect was a local man whom the Sultan sent on a 12 month look around the world to get ideas. It paid off.

All the domes (29 of them) are covered in 24 carat gold leaf, which is something I would usually find obscene, but the Sultan also puts his people number one and they want for nothing. The money comes from oil and gas reserves. Cameras were not permitted in the mosque, so you'll have to take my word for it or better still go and check it out yourselves. You may also get a wave and a grin from the Crown Prince as Glenda and I did as he whizzed past in his Porsche!"

The three of us got back together in Kota Kinabalu which is the capital of Sabah. A fairly typical South-east Asian city with lots of food and craft markets etc. The main reason we went there was an overnight trip to Turtle Island, and luckily we managed to see a large turtle up on the beach digging her hole to lay her eggs (77 of them). The turtles are on the endangered list so the park rangers take the eggs away and put them in a hatchery.

We were then allowed to each hold a newly hatched baby turtle and release them into the sea. We each wished our baby turtles a long and happy life. The turtle life span is much the same as ours, as is that of the orangutans at the Sepilok rehabilitation centre, which is where we went next.

We saw a number of young (5 – 8 year old) orangutans as well as a mum with a tiny baby hanging on tight. Very cute, and wonderful to see them in their own environment. We kept running into people that hadn't been able to see them for one reason or another: not hungry, too wet, thunder etc. Because they are in the wild there is no guarantee that they will come into view. We were very lucky indeed.

The three of us had a great holiday. Glenda had a great time but was pleased to be reunited with Aussie food. Merry and I had more rice for lunch the day we got home.

Apart from all the wonderful natural attributes of a great country, our lasting impression is of the courtesy and friendship of the Malaysian people. For an all round experience I would rate it at least eleven out of ten.

Oh, and just one more thing while I've got your attention. They used to say that a bad workman blames his tools. Well, the reverse applies, too. On an island near the Turtle Islands I met some local village men making beautiful traditional wooden boats.

What amazed me most was not the intricately fabricated timberwork in the boats themselves, which any highly mechanized western boatyard would have been proud to produce, but the fact that with extremely little wastage they hewed perfect 20mm thick planks up to 500mm or more in width and 6m in length out of logs they kept tethered in the sea to stop splitting, using only a chainsaw. To me, that in a nutshell pretty much sums up Borneo. What an eye opener!

COMING EVENTS

In particular, this list covers events of special interest to researchers and managers. If you are interested in any listed events, contact Elery Hamilton-Smith on: <elery@alphalink.com.au>.

2006: May 5 – 7	ACKMA Annual General Meeting Weekend, Kangaroo Island
2006: June ??	Karst Field Studies Workshops, at Bowling Green and Mammoth Cave, Kentucky
2006: July 3-8	XII International Symposium on Vulcanospeleology, Tepoztlan, Morelos, Mexico.
2006: August 14-19	International Field Meeting on exposed continental shelves, International Union for Quaternary Research, Exmouth & Ningaloo Reef, W.A.
2006: Sept 21-23	8th Conference on Limestone Hydrogeology, Neuchatel, Switzerland.

And Looking Ahead:

2007: January	ASF Conference, South Australia, celebrating 50 years of the Federation.
2007: Apr 9-12	CAVEPS, Melbourne, Australia
2007: 29 Apr. – 4 May	17th ACKMA Conference, Buchan, Victoria N.B. This conference will be part of the celebration to mark the centenary of the discovery of Fairy Caves
2009: May	18th ACKMA Conference, Margaret River, Western Australia

VALE RANSOM TURNER

Several years ago, I was able to pass on to many ACKMA members a copy of the National Forest Foundation Video on *Cave Conservation and Ethics*. This was essentially developed and produced, and made available to us, by Ransom Turner, who was formerly Cave Specialist at Lincoln National Forest/Guadalupe Ranger District (near Carlsbad, USA).

It now saddens me to pass along the bad news that Ransom died of injuries from a seizure and fall into a ravine on his ranch in La Luz, New Mexico on Friday, 16 September. Many people remember Ransom as a quiet but dedicated cave manager. He took his job as steward of the caves very seriously and was disappointed that he did not achieve more for them than he was capable of doing before his medical retirement in 2004. He is sorely missed. – Elery Hamilton-Smith