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Shooting for A Change



Photographers capturing nature on a mountain road in Bhutan.

Singapore-based photographer Caroline Pang works with remote communities in Asia to champion conservation through photography.

BY ALYWIN CHEW
PHOTOS CAROLINE PANG

Singapore-based travel and documentary photographer Caroline Pang first picked up a camera in 1992. Then a developer and marketer for nature-based tourism programmes in Malaysia, Pang wanted to illustrate to her boss why the wildlife in the Kinabatangan floodplain, located in the Malaysian state of Sabah in Borneo, was worth promoting. She says: “At that time, I had no clue about photography. I used a point-and-shoot film camera. I didn’t get any good shots at all.”

Undeterred, she bought a secondhand Nikon F100 after consulting with some of her friends, and returned to the floodplain. This time, she had the opportunity to witness a herd of Borneo elephants making its way through the plains. That was the moment she got hooked on nature photography. Pang later joined conservation organisation World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and has continued to advocate for sustainable practices through photography, which is now an integral part of her life.

In 2007, she set up social enterprise Indie Travellers in Singapore. It conducts photography workshops based on the principle of minimising environmental impact, generating economic benefits for local communities and raising awareness of responsible travel practices, mainly in Asia.

To minimise carbon emissions, she plans trips that involve as little vehicular travel as possible. She also makes it a point to reach out to remote communities, as well as hire local guides from these areas. In return for the locals’ hospitality, Pang teaches communities (such as those in Central Flores in Indonesia) photography skills, which they use to document their way of life and create ecotourism interest to their villages.

Pang says: “As a photographer who gets to travel to these places with amazing scenes of nature, people and culture, I think it is only right to be able to do something for the environment so it can be kept that way. I believe that helping the local communities in these places is another way of connecting with them. I don’t think it’s right for me to bring a whole bunch of photographers to these places and simply disappear without giving back in one way or another.”

SUPPORTING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

In the Kinabatangan floodplain, things came full circle for Pang in 2014. Indie Travellers collaborated with the plains’ residents to start the Kinabatangan-Rasig Initiatives, an eco-tourism project aimed at preserving its natural environment. The objective is to protect a 5.9-acre strip of land, which is along a migration route for elephants, from encroachment by palm oil plantations and other human activities.

To support ecotourism to the area, Indie Travellers and the residents have built elevated platforms for wildlife observation, and a floating jetty for visitors, as well as installed camera traps to help monitor the area’s wildlife. Profits from Indie Travellers’ workshops in Kinabatangan go towards funding this project.

The Kinabatangan-Rasig Initiatives also help local villagers earn an income when travellers stay at bed and breakfast establishments run by the local community. One such establishment is Fatimah Homestay, whose owner, Mursalin Abdullah, has been a key player in the conservation efforts. Unlike some landowners who have sold their land to agricultural companies for a profit, Mursalin is working with Pang to improve the ecotourism potential of his land. He says: “My land is surrounded by wildlife sanctuary and I want to do my part to preserve it. It is my heritage.”

Mursalin’s commitment towards conservation has strengthened Pang’s resolve to prevent agricultural companies from converting the land into palm oil plantations, which results in forest fragmentation and a loss of habitat for wildlife, as plantation owners would cordon off their properties with electric fences. This does not just cut off the elephants’ migration route but also results in increased conflict between humans and wildlife over living space and food.

In Singapore, to raise awareness of the importance of the floodplain, Pang has held talks in schools to share with students how visual storytelling can play a key role in conservation efforts. Mincho Kahar, a wildlife warden and spokesperson for the Kinabatangan-Rasig Initiatives, is appreciative of what Pang has done for the local community. He says: “I look up to her as my mentor and sister. She’s a good teacher and good listener... Besides creating economic benefits for the locals through eco-tourism, Caroline has shown us how we can make a good living without having to compromise on the natural environment.

“My interactions with her have also taught me how Singapore, despite being a modern and urbanised country, maintains its balance with nature. I have also learnt that Singaporeans have a positive mindset when it comes to sustainability and caring for nature and wildlife. This is something I really envy.”

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CAROLINE PANG, FOUNDER OF INDIE TRAVELLERS

Moving ahead, Pang hopes to facilitate cross-cultural exchanges between the people of Kinabatangan and Singaporeans. She is currently in talks with universities in Singapore to provide volunteering opportunities for students as well as to host photography workshops to draw attention to the importance of conservation in the area. She also plans to invite people from the Kinabatangan floodplain to share their personal stories of the conservation efforts at photography exhibitions and workshops, which will be held in Singapore later this year.

Indie Travellers has also impacted communities in other parts of Asia. In Indonesia, Pang works with Kompakh, a community-based tourism organisation initiated by WWF Indonesia, to organise photography expeditions. These treks help to support conservation in West Kalimantan, and provide villagers with a source of income.

Over in Bhutan, participants travel to places such as Paro, Thimphu and Punakha, where they witness first-hand traditional Bhutanese ceremonies and experience life in local villages.

“The destinations we offer are where I had worked with the local communities before I started Indie Travellers. It just so happened that they also offer great scenes for photography,” Pang says.

“The latest destination that we have added is Lombok in Indonesia. It’s not just a haven for diving, but we also get to work with Singapore-based social enterprise The Dorsal Effect, which works with local fishermen to save sharks through eco-tourism.”

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