

Study suggests supporting Indonesian women in conservation supports biodiversity

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Learning conservation fieldwork in Indonesia. Credit: Erin Poor, University of Maryland

In a new study published in *Conservation Science and Practice*,

researchers at the University of Maryland (UMD) partnered with Indonesian experts to explore the motivations and challenges of women pursuing a career in conservation sciences in Indonesia. Given that Indonesia is one of the most biodiverse countries on the planet but is simultaneously experiencing extreme rates of deforestation, it is an important target country for the conservation of global biodiversity. Conservation work remains male-dominated in Indonesia, especially fieldwork, so gaining a better understanding of the cultural norms and barriers in place for Indonesian women aspiring to a career in conservation represents an important step in supporting women in this field. With more diverse faces and voices representing global conservation, the country and others like it can tap into the full potential of their intellectual and creative resources to help solve grave global challenges like dwindling biodiversity.

"We are facing huge challenges in the [conservation](#) of biodiversity globally," says Erin Poor, postdoctoral researcher in Environmental Science and Technology (ENST) at UMD and leader of this work. "Climate change, habitat loss and encroachment, an increasing human population putting stress on natural landscapes, increased agriculture—these are all large, complex, multidisciplinary challenges. The more intelligent minds we have working to identify creative solutions that benefit humans and wildlife, the better. This means enabling and creating space for [women](#) and other underrepresented groups to voice their ideas for conservation solutions."

In order to explore this idea while also practically supporting Indonesian women in conservation, Poor developed and facilitated a workshop in Riau Province, central Sumatra, Indonesia due to its importance in global conservation. Working closely with Indonesian leaders at the World Wildlife Fund-Indonesia (WWF) and the Universitas Gadjah Mada, Poor and the UMD team identified a need for culturally appropriate training and mentorship for women wanting to conduct conservation

fieldwork. The workshop was held from September 13-15, 2019, with the goal of providing participants with networking opportunities and offering a setting in which more experienced women in conservation could mentor less experienced women and train them on practical fieldwork skills. As a pilot workshop, 11 Indonesian early-career women attended the workshop, with 3 established Indonesian women providing mentorship and instruction.

"The [young women](#) in our workshop were excited and passionate about conservation," says Poor. "We seemed to pick up on the lack of technical training for these women (which may also be an issue among men), and the lack of encouragement and support evidenced by discouragement from family members, a lack of female mentors and networks, and societal perceptions about female roles. Women are excited and passionate about [conservation work](#), they just need to be given the support and tools to be effective."

Documenting the motivations and challenges of these women and their [unique experiences](#) represents an important step in making sure women in conservation have the support they need, explains Jennifer Mullinax, assistant professor with ENST and co-author.

"It was telling to see the limited information that existed on the paths, support, and limitations of women in STEM in Indonesia. This is one of the first bricks in the wall of knowledge we need to build a more inclusive and diverse conservation discipline in the global south."

Mullinax provided support for the trip to Indonesia, which was in many ways a continuation of work that Poor had started while pursuing her Ph.D. "I believe strongly in uplifting and supporting women, especially women in STEM," stresses Mullinax. "As Erin was describing her experiences in Sumatra and her intentions of having the training workshop, I suggested this may be an opportunity to survey the

participants and start documenting the needs and barriers of women pursuing STEM in Indonesia. Everyone was on board and considered it a great opportunity as well as potential justification for doing more, larger training and surveys in the future."

To assist with the survey development and analysis, Poor and Mullinax reached out to Jen Shaffer, assistant professor in Anthropology with the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences (BSOS). Shaffer identified a key motivator for the women in this study as a love of nature and a passion for the environment, while challenges were mainly related to gender and cultural norms.

"Although I was unable to participate in the workshop, I really appreciated the opportunity to document the motivations and challenges that established and early career Indonesian women working in [conservation science](#) expressed," says Shaffer. "Some of their challenges are unique, and others are experienced by women scientists regardless of where they live and work. Reading their motivation responses to work in conservation was also very uplifting. I saw lots of parallels with discussions I've had with students and colleagues working in conservation science, and it shows our common feelings of passion for, excitement about, and care for nature. We are all working towards a common goal."

"The women in our study expressed some of the same sentiments that I experienced," adds Poor. "First, conservation advertisements often advertise for men—expressing inherent doubt in the physical capabilities of women to do field work. Secondly, Indonesia is extremely diverse in religious, ethnic, and social beliefs, but a belief persists in some geographic regions and in some parts of society that women should be in less physical jobs or be family and household caretakers. Another factor impacting women in the field is that some people also still believe that unmarried men and women should not be alone together."

Poor experienced some of these issues firsthand during her time in Indonesia as a doctoral student. "For me, this was extremely personal," says Poor. "I spent two years in Indonesia doing field work for my Ph.D. research. Almost all of my female friends and I faced sexual harassment and discrimination repeatedly. The field teams I worked with were all male (who were all excellent professionals), and I tried to recruit women to join my team but I only found one woman who actually was able and willing to come to the field. She ended up being hired by WWF as a field team leader (only the second woman in central Sumatra) after my research, and I count that as one of the biggest successes of my research. After experiencing persistent doubt about my abilities as a woman in Indonesia, working to get more women in the field became a personal passion of mine."

Despite these challenges, Poor and the team are hopeful for the future of women in conservation and have plans to expand this work. Poor has been elected as the Vice President of Membership for the Society for Conservation Biology, and she hopes to reach out to young women to increase their involvement in the field. She and the team also hope to continue their research and training efforts on a broader scale.

"I hope this spurs others to take a look at recruitment and retention of women scientists in other areas as well," adds Poor. "By identifying the challenges and motivations women are facing, especially in understudied biodiverse areas in the global south, we can work to remove these challenges and encourage motivations. However, this must be done at the request and with the coordination of scientists in those locations. I am hoping that in Indonesia specifically, those involved with this study will begin thinking about and implementing similar workshops and events specifically geared towards young women conservation biologists."

More information: Erin E. Poor et al, Increasing diversity to save biodiversity: Rising to the challenge and supporting Indonesian women

in conservation, *Conservation Science and Practice* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/csp2.395](https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.395)

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