

Saving rare elephants with tourism snaps

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Borneo Elephant (*Elephas maximus borneensis*). Credit: Wikipedia

A Murdoch University student is investigating whether pictures posted to social media of rare pygmy elephants could help with their management and conservation.

Honours student Obelia Walker from the School of Veterinary and Life Sciences has been piloting the cutting-edge [project](#) in Borneo, Malaysia for three months with collaborators Sakau Rainforest Lodge, Borneo Eco Tours, BEST Society and the Universiti of Malaysia Sabah.

Ms Walker has been working closely with tour guides and tourists visiting the Lower Kinabatangan River where the [elephants](#) can be found, and asking them to post their pictures from sightings to FlickrR and other [social media](#) platforms with the hashtag #PicMeElephant.

Similar to an approach successfully applied to elephant research in Africa, Ms Walker and her partners are promoting the sharing of geotagged pictures of the Bornean elephants. This means the images contain geographical coordinates that allow Ms Walker to map where and when the photos are

taken.

While just 12 geotagged pictures were shared on social media in the first half of the year, guides and tourists have shared more than 170 geotagged pictures since the project launched in August, and more photographs are promised.

Not only is the project providing the tour guides with information about the elephants, but the images will help identify and track the movement of individual elephants, family groups and herds through the lower Kinabatangan region of Sabah, supporting the conservation of this habitat.

"Bornean pygmy elephants are not only the smallest but also one of the least researched of all elephant species and are endangered with an estimated population of less than 2,000 left in Sabah, so there is a real need to collect data," said Ms Walker, who has been based at Sukau Rainforest Lodge for the project.

"Main threats to their survival include habitat loss and human-elephant conflicts, including three isolated instances of poaching in the past 12 months.

"The best way of conserving the elephants is by mapping and tracking them through their habitat, so that we can understand their ranges and protect them."

Ms Walker said utilising tourism and tour guide pictures was a non-invasive and cost effective technique for tracking movements over a given period.

"The feedback I've had from the tourists and naturalists so far has been extremely positive," she said. "Guests have been very enthusiastic about contributing to the project by uploading their pics, usually when they return home from their travels in Sabah."

Ms Walker is also collecting the comments posted

by tourists on the images to help gauge the significance of pygmy elephants to ecotourism in the region and potentially inform future funding and management decisions.

With the continued support of the tour guides and her Sabah-based research partners, Ms Walker is hoping that elephant pictures will keep appearing on Flickr and other social media sites after she returns to Australia in November.

Mr Albert Teo, the Managing Director of Borneo Eco Tours, said the research project was important to ensure the future of the elephants and ecotourism in Sabah.

"More information will also increase our appreciation of our natural resources and the need to conserve them for the sustainability of the livelihood of the local community. We can't manage what we don't know," he said.

Ms Walker added that [pygmy elephants](#) are regarded as one of the 'big five' wildlife species to be seen in Borneo, and there is a feeling among the guides this approach could be applied to the other species, including orang-utans and crocodiles.

"Given the nature of the collaboration in this project, there would be future opportunities for students from both Murdoch University and the Universiti of Malaysia Sabah to adapt this approach in their own research pursuits."

Provided by Murdoch University

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