

CREATIVE NONFICTION

How to Convert a Hunter or How to Turn a Hunter into an Expert Birder and Conservationist

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Abstract

This creative nonfiction essay is a Hermit Crab essay, a piece artfully crafted to tell the story of two men working on wildlife conservation research in Sarawak, Malaysia. It borrows the format of a step-by-step “how-to” guide to describe the different aspects of each man’s work and their interdependent relationship in the field. This piece can also be viewed as a slice of life memoir that captures the nuances of their homosocial relationship. They started out as opposites, each vastly different from the other in upbringing, experience and outlook. One young man is skilled at making a living from the forest by tracking and hunting wildlife, while the other is a wildlife biologist, researcher and conservationist. By working together in the spirit of mutual respect, the conservationist converts the hunter through jokes, accidents, and daily routine observations of wildlife over the course of two years — without relying on overtly didactic or prescriptive lecturing.

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It is said that young Iban men like to portray themselves as the strong and brave Iban warriors of old. Or so I am told by Melvin Gumal, a wildlife biologist who has worked in Sarawak for more than thirty years. He is the 2014 winner of the Whitley Award on conservation of Ape Habitats. He should know.

“If God had wanted humans to live in peat swamps, He would have given them wings!” These were Dr David Chivers’ words when visiting the field site of Melvin Gumal (his PhD student) in Sedilu, Sarawak. Both Melvin’s supervisors had been determined to visit his field site — the one-hour drive from Kuching (the capital of Sarawak) to Pendam, 30-minute boat ride from Pendam to Sebangau, 5-hour boat ride on a 5 hp engine from Sebangau to base camp and finally, the 7-hour walk in the swamp to the actual flying fox roosting site. Large numbers of flying foxes (*Pteropus vampyrus natunae*) roost deep in the peat swamp. Melvin was focusing his PhD studies on the flying foxes’ roosting behaviour.

Dr Chivers and Dr Elizabeth Bennett (Melvin’s field supervisor), agreed it was “the field site from hell.” It could have been much more difficult without Melvin’s research assistant, Lihon Singga. This “How to” article is really about Melvin and Lihon, their relationship, their work in a remote, barely accessible spot in Sarawak from 1998-2000, and Lihon’s “conversion.” The latter led to him working with other Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) field researchers in other peat swamps in Sarawak, as well as in orang-utan habitats — and becoming a much more sustainable hunter. When Melvin told me his stories, I thought they fit beautifully into a series of key points on how we could convert a hunter.

1. Let him tell you his stories

The first time Melvin was out in the field with Lihon, they sat on a log at Sebangau (in the Samarahan district). There, they waited for the flying foxes to emerge from their roosts. That was when Lihon told Melvin that he had shot and killed 43 flying foxes. A young Iban farmer-hunter from Sebangau, he had mostly killed them to eat. Lihon evidently had no idea what his actions meant to the young conservationist and PhD student. Melvin says, “He naively told me that he had also shot at a dolphin and had seen other dolphins come to its aid. He was on a boat and shot it for fun. He even told me the dolphin emitted a loud piercing call when it was shot.”

Melvin stayed calm; he was not there to preach. He was there to make sure that he could live in the peat swamp for two years, gathering data on the flying foxes. And he did accomplish this feat — despite the remote location, the long hours in the peat swamp, his toe nails falling off because they were constantly wet, and having to survive solely on canned food, rice and heavily

sweetened coffee. Thanks to his research and subsequent work in the Forest Department and WCS Malaysia, the flying fox habitat is now a protected area. Sedilu National Park was gazetted as such in 2010.

2. Let him include 2 kg of sugar in the rations

Two kilograms of sugar for seven days in the field! And rice — stacks of rice! It was a culture shock for both men. Melvin recalls, “The first time I was in a forest for an extended duration, my field assistant didn’t understand that I didn’t like to drink coffee with sugar while I was wondering why he brought 2 kg of sugar for the field trip each time.”

Melvin soon realised the reason for the large amounts of sugar and rice. The field assistants needed the sugar and carbohydrates to give them enough fuel and energy for the hard, physical labour in the forest. Meals were basic. Food rations consisted of black bean sardines, tomato sardines, and sometimes, biscuits and luncheon meat. They subsisted on that together with rice or noodles, for two years. It took the COVID-19 pandemic and partial lockdown to force Melvin to eat sardines again.

3. Make the best of his smoking habit

Initially irritated by Lihon’s smoking habits, Melvin soon learned to appreciate the cigarette smoke. Put simply, Melvin says, “The annoying smell of the Indonesian-made kretek or leaf-roll cigarettes can be borne because it helps keep mosquitoes away as you’re trekking through the forest or resting at the campsite.”

Life in the field is broken down into a series of important actions and habits. This ensures that basic needs are fulfilled. One of the most important issues to deal with is how to bear the aggravating mosquitoes that cause great discomfort and annoyance at any time of the day. Mosquito nets and thick, long socks help at night. But during the day, Melvin learned that cigarette smoke — particularly that of the strong Indonesian variety — was a great help in keeping the pesky insects at bay.

4. Let him build the camp site

This really is a lesson about humility and acknowledgement of others’ essential skills. It is rarely obtained in the classroom. Higher degrees from renowned universities are nothing when faced with the reality of a tropical peat forest. Getting through each day is a challenge in itself. And

without an assistant who is equipped with the necessary skills to build a camp site and live in the forest, a researcher could never survive in the forest — much less even begin to gather the data for his or her work.

There were actually two campsites for Melvin's research work in Sedilu: the field hut (where Lihon and Melvin stayed deep in the peat swamp) and the field house (built on stilts on the side of Sedilu River). Despite being built on rough-cut planks, the field house could accommodate six researchers and assistants. Lihon's expertise was invaluable at both sites. The smaller field hut accommodated Lihon and Melvin alone. Lihon was able to build the camp site above the rising and ebbing water line. Because of his skill, they were able to sleep dry in their hammocks, after a full day of being water-logged in the peat swamp.

A typical day started with a wake-up call shortly before six. The first task would be to boil water for coffee and have a breakfast of instant noodles or rice and biscuits. This was their staple diet. Then they would have to get into their wet and cracking underwear, which had been dried by the campfire built to cook dinner. All their clothes smelled burnt. But the time spent between waking up at 5:50 a.m. until they stepped into the water was precious. This was when they would be dry for about 30-40 minutes, as they ate their breakfast.

Strangely, Melvin and Lihon had no fear of snakes or crocodiles. Although they saw pythons and crocodiles, they were, as Melvin said, "foolishly fearless." He encountered a crocodile with an eye as large as his thumb and a snake that he almost mistook for a stick.

5. Share your observations with him when he asks

These were Melvin's own observations of Lihon. *Over time, he was watching me writing things about animals, about flying foxes and their behaviour and I taught him how to do emergence counts* [Melvin was studying flying fox behaviour and this included taking note of the numbers of animals emerging from their roosts to seek food on a daily basis]. *Because he was very good at observing animals, he was adding information like, "Oh, there's that bird there" and he would open up The Birds of Borneo and he would identify the birds from the book.*

Over time, he started having a little booklet [of his own] and he would write things and he would tell me like, "Oh, I saw this, I saw that." So he stopped being an unsustainable hunter, if you will. Although he would go hunting for a pig to feed the family at Gawai (and even now, I think), he wasn't as non-sustainable as before.

And the odd thing was, when I was watching all these flying foxes and their behaviour, when I came out, I would be about 100 meters away from him because I wanted him away and not disturb me. [But then] he would ask me questions like, "Why are those young juvenile bats, males, they seem to be taunting and trying to mate each other?" This made me realise, "Oh, he saw that too. It wasn't just me recording." It was very interesting that he validated what I saw by his own observations. That's what was interesting.

6. Don't get mad when he plays a prank on you

Even when it means that you struggled to find your way back to the campsite for four hours, only to discover that your trusted field guide had been hiding and watching you throughout the whole time!

The flying fox roost actually moves 50-100 meters per day. To observe them, the researcher has to move his camp as well. Melvin got lost because he had asked Lihon to leave him alone. He had wanted to observe the bats without Lihon smoking beside him or disturbing him with chatter. So he asked Lihon to return to the campsite on the pretext that it was about to rain and Lihon needed to make sure everything at the camp would be safe. The campsite was about one hour's walk through the peat swamp. When Lihon left Melvin at about 9 a.m., he gave him some food for lunch.

While he was eating his lunch at about one or two in the afternoon, it started raining heavily and branches started falling all around him. Melvin had practised the Iban way of tracking in the forests by cutting or bending little branches and putting little cut-markers on the trails. Now, these markers were practically invisible due to the heavy rain and the branches crashing down. At the time, only heavy-duty analog cell phones were available and few people had them. Certainly not forest guards and field assistants. Melvin's sole analog phone could not be used anyway, as Sedilu was so remote that there was no signal available. As there was no way for Melvin to call to find out if Lihon was safe, he decided to start making his way back to the campsite alone. In any case, he could not continue observing the bats through the rain.

It was shortly before 4 p.m. when he set out. In the downpour, he thought he could see the cuts he had made in the trees and recognise the little twigs that marked his trail. Some time later, however, he would see the same cuts and twigs. Finally, he had to admit that he had been walking in circles. When he had come upon the same markers for the fourth time, Melvin actually had a terrible thought: Lihon had been killed by a falling tree and he would be lost forever!

Desperate to find a way out, he kept walking in circles for nearly three hours, till past 6 p.m. Finally, he found a way out. Somehow, he saw a little twig that was different from the rest and he followed it out. He was walking back to the transact trail when he suddenly heard a noise that made him jump. “Boo!” It was Lihon behind the tree! Melvin had nearly used his parang on him. He asked Lihon how long he had been watching him walking around in circles. The answer was astounding: a few hours! Melvin was so mad he snapped at Lihon. But he eventually admitted that “in the end, I also laughed because it was really funny and he wasn’t dead, he had just been watching and enjoying himself watching me walking around and around in circles. Iban sense of humour.”

7. Trust him

This is Melvin’s account of one of the most frightening incidents that occurred during his two years of field work. It involved quick thinking in an emergency, trust, a great deal of determination, and yes, luck!

It was probably in the 18th month of my field work and this time, the bats and the roost had moved 50 to 100 meters and were now closer to the field camp on stilts which housed six people as compared to the field hut, which is several hours in. So, it was decided that we were going to take a boat from the camp and walk in to track the flying foxes. As usual, I would leave Lihon a hundred meters behind me. Sometimes, he would sleep when I was working, come to me, give me my lunch, and then go back and nap and smoke. This time around, I was tracking the flying foxes and I had a Rambo parang, a very nice Rambo parang, which people said was not as good as a proper parang, but it was a nice Rambo parang. [The blade of the Rambo parang just looked good. It was stiff and did not have the springiness of a regular parang and thus cuts would bounce off the bark.] I would cut little notches in trees to leave myself signs so I wouldn’t get lost as I moved towards the roost. About a hundred meters ahead of Lihon, I was standing next to a selunsor tree. Usually when you do a nick on a tree, if the tree is soft, it would drive the sharp end of the parang into the tree and trim the branch. But selunsor stems are really hard [unfortunately, at the time, I didn’t know that]. When I raised the parang to chop a little nick, it bounced off the stem, the bowl of the tree and went into my knee. And I’m like, “Oh, rubbish. Shit. Crap,” and worse. I knew I had done something terribly wrong.

I backtracked and walked towards Lihon and said, “Lihon, wake up, wake up!” He said, “Why are you here?” I said, “I think I have cut myself.” He said, “What do you mean you think you have cut yourself?” “The parang hit me on the knee” and he said, “Oh my God.” So, he said, “Let me have a look.” I was too scared to look. He

said, "I have to tear open your long jungle pants." He did and then he said, "I can see your bone." I said, "Oh shit!" But he said, "Never mind, never mind, we have to get you out of here!" I said, "Okay."

"This is what we'll do," he said. He removed his socks which he uses when he sleeps to tie around my big cut to prevent the murky water from getting in. He then bit and chewed his rolled tobacco and stuffed the chewed tobacco leaves into my wound. He wrapped it up tight and he said, "We have another hour to walk out of here. You will be fine, we'll walk slowly." I walked, and for the first 10 minutes, I felt like, hey, I can do this because I had a lot of adrenaline. The last 15 minutes, I was in excruciating pain. Finally, we got to the river and the camp and hut was on the other side. We could see from where we were, about 200 meters away from the hut, the forest guard called Apai Wat was happily cooking and playing Iban music really loudly. We were screaming, but he didn't hear us. Then Libon said, "He can't hear us, the music is really loud. Apai is a bit deaf anyhow." I'm like, "Now what?" Because we had been dropped off at that bank in the morning and Apai was going to pick us up at 6 p.m. or 6:30 p.m. that night.

We knew there were crocodiles in the river, but Libon looked at me and said, "Do you want to swim?" I said, "I have got a cut" and he said, "Well, you can stay here, or you can swim." So, I'm like, "Okay," and then I said, "Do you see any blood?" But we couldn't see because we had been sloshing around in the swamp. So, he said, "All right, you swim in front and I'll swim at the back." So, we went into the river and swam right to the other side. It took us maybe 10 minutes of swimming to get to the other side. When we got to the other side, Apai said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Why didn't you hear us screaming for help?" and then he said, "Oh, I couldn't hear you." "Your music's too loud," I said. Then, we looked at the longboat — Johnson, the other field assistant, had taken a 15-horsepower boat up to the longhouse. We were stuck with a five-horsepower engine. Libon said, "We have to take you to the doctor." So, quickly they bundled me for a five-hour boat ride down the river. We pattered down river to the dispensary.

At the dispensary, the government medical assistant looked at me and asked, "What happened?" I said, "Parang." He said, "Oh." Then, he took off the football socks and said, "What is inside here?" I said, "My assistant put tobacco leaves in there to protect it." "Oh my gosh, there's so many!" He took out a whole bunch, then he said, "I need to give you an injection." I said, "Yes, please do." He injected me and he sewed me up.

When I was done with the injection, I suddenly thought, "Oh God, I still have field work to do. What do I do?" Libon said, "Aren't you going to tell your wife?" I said, "If I tell my wife, she will ask me to come home." So, I said, "Let's do field work at night." So that very night, we started field work at night. I didn't tell my wife for another two or three months and once I had completed the field work, I related the parang story to my field

supervisor, Dr Elizabeth Bennett and she said, “You are so lucky! A friend of mine had used a parang and cut off the calf of his knee and couldn’t walk after that properly!” I replied, “Yes, I was a wee bit lucky.” Yeap.

8. Offer him an alternative livelihood

Offer the hunter opportunities to be a field assistant for other conservation projects. The best way to ensure that the forests remain safe from conversion to plantations or development is to find the people an alternative livelihood. This must involve the land and animals: the way they are in their traditional state. In the same way, if you want people to stop hunting wildlife, you need to offer them an alternative way to put food on the table. Lihon was an Iban hunter who lived off the land — as was his right according to the Native Customary Rights. Many Iban men do this in the rural areas. Some believe this is a rite of passage; hunting prowess is a positive and manly attribute.

It was a turning point when Lihon realised that his skills in the forest were useful to Parks staff, wildlife researchers and eco-tour agencies. People were actually willing to pay to see the wildlife in the forest that he might have hunted in the past. Suddenly, he saw opportunities that he had never imagined before.

When I was talking to Joshua Pandong, the Head of the WCS’s Orang-utan Research Unit, he turned to me and asked, “How do you make conservationists of people?” It was a rhetorical question. Josh knew, as Melvin did, that you do it by giving them an alternative livelihood that depends on the survival — or even the flourishing — of the natural environment and the neighbouring wildlife. The people in the local communities will stay in the longhouses if they see there’s work and they can earn a living by remaining there.

It is not just about saving the wildlife and their habitats. It is also about preserving the traditional way of life in the longhouses. The call of the cities, with their modern buildings, technological advances and facilities, is strong. Governments — and even citizens — lament the loss of their traditions in the face of development and globalisation. However, if there is a good reason for the people to remain in their traditional homes and if they see that others appreciate and even embrace their way of life, they will stay. So, as in the case of Lihon Singga — the trustworthy and quick-thinking Iban hunter with excellent tracking skills and an extreme sense of humour — a

hunter could become an excellent birder. He could appreciate the wildlife he observes, instead of just killing it for fun or for his family's next meal.

This is how you convert a hunter.