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Kiwi off to record orang-utans

PAUL MULROONEY - The Dominion Post | Thursday, 26 June 2008

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Fulbright scholar Josephine Beck is about to go ape over the vocal repertoire of orang-utans.

That's the research topic that has earned her a \$33,000 grant to attend Harvard University to examine the chest-beating behaviour and screeching sounds of the primate in its natural habitat.

Only after she has completed her studies of two remote areas of Indonesian Borneo will she be able to enjoy the relative gentility of Harvard University's ivy-league surroundings.

From August till the end of the year Ms Beck, 24, from Taupo, expects to be roughing it in the wilds of Borneo to research the primates' sound, their behavioural patterns and the extent to which these characteristics have been passed down through generations.

No comprehensive study of the sounds of the wild orang-utan species Pongo pygmaeus pygmaeus had been carried out, she said.

"I want to make a database of their vocal repertoire, that includes all of their sounds, all of the calls and all of their functions."

She would also compare one population of orang-utan with another.

More than 50 of the primates would be studied by the Canterbury University graduate, who would be accompanied by two Indonesian field assistants and a student from an Indonesian university.

The Graduate Award, from Fulbright and the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology, is worth about US\$25,000 (NZ\$33,000).

The money pays for Ms Beck's tuition and living expenses but not her research costs, which she hopes to fund from separate grants.

It had been five years since the orang-utans had been visited by researchers so Ms Beck hoped that by the time her field research was completed they would be more at ease.

Primate acoustics was "a fairly new field" for her, she said.

"It's going to tell us whether these calls are learned from other members of the group, and whether they are completely different to another population they haven't come into contact with."

The pending isolation did not bother her, she said. "It sounds more romantic than it is. Once you get out there and you're up to your waist in water and there's things like leeches, the reality is a little different from what it sounds. But it's definitely what I love to do."

Long term, Ms Beck does not want to focus solely on primatology, though her background in biology saw her carry out field work studying chimpanzees and puppy-nosed monkeys in Nigeria.



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BUSH CALLS: Fulbright scholar Josephine Beck is heading to the wilds of Borneo to study primate acoustics.

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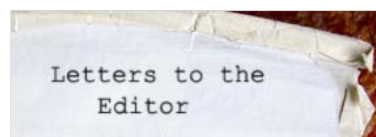
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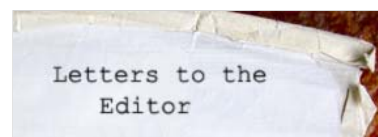
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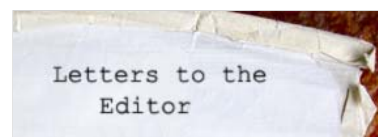
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