Dr Hotlin Ompusunggu, a Sumatran dentist, is the co-founder and programme manager of Alam Sehat Lestari (ASRI), a health-care and conservation charity located in Sukadana on the Indonesian island of Borneo. She was recently given the Whitley Award for her efforts to improve the health and well-being of rainforest communities, while also safeguarding a globally important habitat for gibbons, hornbills and orangutans, among many other species.

The Whitley Award is a British nature conservation prize that comes with £50,000 (US$74,500) prize money. Whitley Awards are made annually at a ceremony in London, hosted by Princess Anne, Princess Royal.

“It feels exciting having won the award,” Hotlin Ompusunggu told Dental Tribune in an interview. The 56-year-old dentist, originally from Sumatra, now works in Gunung Palung National Park in West Kalimantan, an Indonesian province on the island of Borneo. The park is home to about ten per cent of the world’s orangutans, as well as clouded leopards, hornbills, crested fireback pheasants and sun-bears. Its two 1,000 metres peaks are swathed by tall dipterocarpous forests in their lowlands and montane cloud forests near their summits. The park is a watershed for the roughly 60,000 villagers who live in its borders.

Health-care provision almost impossible

Local people living around the park are poor, with an average income of US$15 a month. The provision of good local health care is almost impossible in this region. Most people are subsistence farmers, and local farming methods are heavily reliant on expensive and dangerous chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Health care and farming costs drive villagers into debt, and illegal logging is one of the few sources of cash income. Logging and slash-and-burn agriculture are destroying the Gunung Palung watershed, resulting in flooding, damage to agricultural areas, and high rates of waterborne illnesses. And so the cycle of poor health, poverty and environmental destruction is perpetuated.

The charity’s name ‘Alam Sehat Lestari’ means ‘Healthy Nature, Everlasting’ and the abbreviation ASRI, ‘harmoniously balanced’. ASRI aims to stop the progression of the deforestation cycle by working to empower local people to turn from loggers into forest guardians. Members work with local communities to integrate high-quality, affordable health care with strategies to protect the threatened forest, and go into the park. The charity enables local people to access health care that they could normally not afford, providing villagers with free contraconception, as well as immunisation, catecary and general medicine. They are also educated on health, the environment and the importance of protecting the links between both. In return, villagers exchange items used in conservation work, e.g. seedlings for reforestation or manure for organic farming, or participate in work like replanting parts of the park previously damaged by illegal logging. In this way, the villagers help ASRI to conserve Gunung Palung National Park and, ultimately, the fate of the park lies in their hands.

The ASRI clinic was born in 2007 when Hotlin Ompusunggu began working with Dr Kinari Webb, founder of Health In Harmony (HIH), a US-based non-profit organisation that supported the establishment of the Indonesian ASRI. “HIH supports ASRI through fundraising, by coordinating expert volunteers for ASRI, and providing knowledge resources when they are needed,” Antonia Gorog, HIH Programme Director, told Dental Tribune. “The organisation was founded on the principle that human health and environmental health are tightly linked,” she explained.

Poor dental hygiene

“For the people in West Kalimantan poor dental hygiene is a major problem across the board,” Hotlin Ompusunggu explained. “When I came here in 2007 and first started treating patients, I did a survey. The results showed that 100 per cent of the people were in great need of dental care,” Hotlin Ompusunggu said.

“I have worked in many places in Indonesia and think with regard to dental health care this is one of the worst. The dentist does not only treat patients, but also aims to educate them. She started informing patients, particularly children, on dental health care and environmental conservation at the same time. “We give out toothbrushes to children so they can maintain their oral health. However, we quickly learned that things which have been given away for free are not appreciated that much. So we started swapping toothbrushes for bamboo sticks, which we need to plant trees in the park. This way the children will remember that we planted a tree, will get to know why we planted a tree and find out that it is important. The children begin to appreciate the fact that, without trees, they would not have the water supply to brush their teeth. Every time they brush their teeth they can be grateful for the trees and the fact that they are contributing to the cause to save and replant trees,” Hotlin Ompusunggu explained to Dental Tribune.

The cornerstone of ASRI’s programme is health care, which is linked to conservation initiatives in multiple ways. Villagers can receive high-quality health care, including dental care, at the ASRI clinic on the border of the national park. For local people, there are many ways to receive help. “Communities that cease illegal logging receive discounted or free care services at the clinic. Other initiatives involve Goats for Widows, a project that provides mated pairs of goats to severely disadvantaged members of the community and receives in return the first kid and sacks of manure for organic farming, and Organic Farming Training, which helps farmers improve soil quality and removes the need for opening new farmland each year,” Antonia Gorog said.

In May, 50 Forest Guardians joined the tea party. “Their wages are paid from the Whitley Award prize money. “We knew the money should go towards new staff that help to protect the park,” the dentist explained. “This plan was part of the proposal for the Whitley Award.”

According to Antonia Gorog, the number of staff is no indication of the number of people involved. “Many thousands are involved. In 2009, first year of ASRI’s reforestation programme, 4,000 families gave seedlings and other essentials for the reforestation work in exchange for mosquitos nets. In the 2010 reforestation effort, hundreds of people traded seedlings for toothbrushes. Hundreds more helped in the planting both years. Over 100 people joined the weddings of the widows who received goats, and the 14,000 patients that we have cared for in our clinic and the mobile clinic."

Even though ASRI was initially received with scepticism by some local communities, they have gained respect and improved relations. The charity strives to be honest and transparent about the programme’s goals and is extremely prudent regarding the use of funds. “ASRI has successfully demonstrated to local communities that it really is about helping them, and not just for its own gain,” Antonia Gorog emphasised.

Support is always welcome

The organisation is always grateful for any support. HIH coordinates expert volunteers for ASRI, such as medical professionals who could help to train Indonesian doctors and nurses in the clinic, or people knowledgeable about organic farming and reforestation. “Additional expertise in goat husbandry, composting and organic farming would soon build a hospital, solar engineering, and workshops for making toothbrushes would also be welcome,” Antonia Gorog told.

Anyone wishing to support this worthwhile and ecologically oriented health care programme can visit www.alamsehatlestari.org for more information. The organisation is also able to welcome donations, which it will use to help local people improve their health and well-being. Anyone wishing to support this worthwhile and ecologically oriented health care programme can visit www.alamsehatlestari.org for more information. The organisation is also able to welcome donations, which it will use to help local people improve their health and well-being.