

## Expedition: Folklore and Conservation in Siberut

### Shamans and Gibbons: Living in Harmony With the Forest

**Summary:** Allison Hanes carried the WINGS flag to Indonesia's isolated Siberut Island to investigate connections between local animist communities and the Mentawai gibbons amidst climate change and other encroaching pressures. Through interviews and field excursions, Allison and her team gathered indigenous knowledge and original content for their multimedia documentary feature film.



Allison in the rainforests of Siberut

#### THE EXPEDITION

The shamans of Siberut are the connectors between the local communities and the environment in which they live. In their tradition, knowledge is passed from one shaman to another, ensuring communities live in harmony with the forest. With more and more young people moving away from the islands to pursue economic opportunities elsewhere as well as pressure from tourism and development, there is a great risk of this ancient knowledge becoming lost if it is not soon recorded.

The Mentawai gibbons (*Hylobates klossii*) of Siberut are renowned for their complicated and melodic songs, and distinct acrobat fluid movements through the canopies. Male and female pairs sing duets at dawn and dusk to strengthen their bonds and announce their territories. Listed as Endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), these primates face a host of threats, with the most insidious being habitat loss.

Through our interviews with local inhabitants, we fleshed out the connections between humans and gibbons, both presently and historically. Our project is timely not least because we are on the precipice of climatically- influenced environmental collapse, boundless deforestation and rampant tourism converging into a clash of cultures. On the island of Siberut where our Mentawaian shamans live, plans are in place to build a resort in 2019.



Siberut's Location

We are equipped with the tools for investigating these confrontations and an unprecedented technological ability to bring these places to the world. The framework for which we develop and showcase content will pave the way for future experiences and a reimagining of wildlife documentary filmmaking.

The information gathered on this expedition will be used to inform the creation of a feature film, virtual reality short and an immersive multimedia exhibit using gibbon song and indigenous knowledge to showcase the connections between humans, other species and their environment. Targeting an international audience with special emphasis in Asia, which is home to 10 gibbon habitat countries, we hope to inspire action and a sense of environmental stewardship for our shared planet.

**WHO**  
Allison C. Hanes

**WHAT**  
Assessment of cultural knowledge of Mentawai gibbons via the locals and shamans of Siberut

**WHEN**  
June 8 – June 24, 2019

**WHERE**  
Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia

**WHY**  
To inform the development of a feature film using gibbon song and indigenous knowledge to showcase the connections between humans, other species and their environment.



Allison Hanes

### EXPEDITION GOALS

Our goals were to investigate the connections between local animist communities on the isolated island of Siberut, part of the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia, and the gibbons that reside there.

### EXPEDITION FUNDING

Funding was provided by private investors of Gibbon Film LLC, One Health Productions LLC, and a Flag Carrier grant from WINGS WorldQuest.

### CHALLENGES FACED

Access is an ever-present complication in this region. Much of the journey was conducted by boat or on foot, which limited the daily amount of territory we could cover and the equipment kits we could carry. The isolated nature of many villages meant we had no electricity access without bringing along a generator. This made charging camera batteries and other equipment difficult and, at times, impossible.

While searching for gibbons and gibbon stories in the remote north and central region of the island, time was a limiting factor. The beginning of the trip was spent in a region where there were few gibbon stories and thus a small interview sample size as well as mixed information about gibbon locations. During our time “up river” in the central north region, local shamans informed us that the specific gibbon stories and songs we were looking for were in very distant and difficult locations to access - requiring at least three days of rigorous trekking and camping each way.

Many villages had not been visited by non-locals so a translator was necessary for all interviews and conversations. Our local nonprofit partners, Indigenous Education Foundation (IEF) and Yayasan Pendidikan Budaya Mentawai, ensured we had the translation and guide support necessary for these conversations. Since there is no written language in Mentawai, it’s essential to build trust and spend multiple days with each family to capture important stories and information. Subsequent visits will include more time in each region to gather data and ensure a larger sample size.

### EXPEDITION RESULTS

Over the course of two weeks, we conducted and filmed six full semi-structured interviews and 10 abbreviated semi-structured interviews with local Mentawaians.



Allison and one of her families

The most successful times to conduct interviews were in the evening after dinner, when communal conversation and singing would occur.

We collected enough stories about gibbons and strong potential characters as well as other essential photography and video footage to warrant a second expedition with a full production team in early 2020. Since the original goal was to identify gibbon stories and potential film characters, the abundance of information and content gathered made this trip a far greater success than expected.

### ABOUT THE FLAG CARRIER

Allison Hanes is a biologist, veterinary technician, photographer and filmmaker focused on one health conservation. Since receiving her MSc in Primate Conservation at Oxford Brookes University while assessing disease transmission between humans and mountain gorillas in Uganda, she has worked for environmentally-focused nonprofits across the tropics. Based in Brooklyn, New York, Allison produces and directs films across many disciplines, including wildlife, science, tech, human rights and the arts. She is the founder of One Health Productions and director of *The Great Call*, a multimedia documentary film project highlighting gibbon song within the forests of Asia. Set for distribution in 2022, *The Great Call* aims to connect people to nature through song.

### EXPEDITION TEAM

Allison C. Hanes - Team Leader

#### *Supporting Members:*

Robby Siagian - Translator

Aman Lepon - Shaman

Filemon Sagulu - Guide

Bastianus Adhe Skarigi - Guide



Allison filming with Filemon in an abandoned church in the remote north of Siberut Island

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[www.onehealthproductions.com](http://www.onehealthproductions.com)  
[facebook.com/mentawaifoundation](https://facebook.com/mentawaifoundation)



WINGS WORLDQUEST

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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