



# Expedition: The Living Forest

Field Study: Ethnoecology

**Summary:** The Living Forest aims to highlight and revalue our understandings of indigenous knowledge. In the midst of ecological devastation and focus on technological fixes, the West drowns in data; but what it lacks is wisdom. This project attempts to convene the sciences, traditional knowledge, and the arts into one, and to provide new and exciting ways to explore and revalue our relationship to the earth. The rainforest of Mount Bosavi is home to self-reliant communities and to one of the worlds' richest biodiversity ecosystems. The hunter-gatherer residents identify powerfully with their land. In Bosavi, nature has agency, rights, and is alive. Traditional ecological knowledge is developed in continuous direct contact with the surroundings. Up until now these communities have refused to sell their forest to commercial loggers, but the custodians of the forest struggle to find necessary recognition and support. They lack basic services and seek assistance for crucially important income-generating projects.

## THE EXPEDITION

The dense tropical rainforest upon Mount Bosavi, an extinct volcano in the Southern Highlands in Papua New Guinea, is home to a group of self-reliant hunter-gatherers who live in small villages. There are no roads. People follow steep and winding mountain paths to reach bush camps and villages.

Baijens continues the work she began in 2016 with WINGS flag #2. During the first expedition, she collected soft and hard data on (so-called) Deep Maps. The maps seek to convey the complex multi-layered aspects of the forest, as perceived by inhabitants.



Chief Sigalo, his wife Sotobeya and Arita.



## WHO

Arita Baaijens

## WHAT

Research symbiotic relationships between humans, forest, and technology

## WHEN

December 2019 and January 2020

## WHERE

Mount Bosavi, Southern Highlands, Papua New Guinea

## WHY

Rethink Western understanding of relations between humans and nature. Empower indigenous communities in Bosavi to improve their way of life and protect the forest

Toward the end of her research, Baaijens realised she had overlooked an important aspect of the Bosavi universe: sound.

Inhabitants rely on sound rather than sight to navigate their way into the world. Also, birds, nature beings and humans communicate with each other and exchange messages. Baaijens' blind spot perfectly illustrates the cultural bias of western researchers toward cultures which embrace a different methodology and philosophy.

In December 2019, Baaijens returned to Bosavi to continue her research and fill in the gaps. She explored communication between species and came up with some uneasy questions and provocative answers. If a forest can speak and can be heard and can be understood in Bosavi, how does this challenge our understanding of what it means to be human and distinct from other life forms? Are we able to rethink our misconceptions and rather identify with and be-with other organisms of the world? Indigenous knowledge and technologies belie the concept of "survival of the fittest" and rely upon the "survival of the most symbiotic." The expedition



Arita Baaijens captures ambient forest sounds.

redefines traditional ecological knowledge as being original, complex, and vital to a more complete understanding of ecological intelligence.

### EXPEDITION GOALS

The goals of the expedition were to:

- Research symbiotic relationships between humans, forest ecology, and technology.
- Learn more about local beliefs with regard to human-nature relations.
- Explore the contribution and impact of indigenous knowledge to the biological diversity in Bosavi.
- Help design a plan of action to protect the rainforest and improve the quality of life within Bosavi communities.
- Capture ambient forest sounds, bird language and Bosavi music to create an all-inclusive sound matrix.
- Explore an alternative cartographic method to map both subjective and objective data.
- Rethink Western dominated views of human-animal relations in natural surroundings, explore alternative perspectives, and articulate new narratives to remodel our modern world.



Bird expert and forest guide Albert Dalilome

### EXPEDITION RESULTS

Language, beliefs, and Bosavi music are powerfully shaped by the environment. Bird expert Albert Dalilome shared his knowledge of the meaning of bird song and initiated Baaijens into the complex universe of Bosavi. Nature is a force to be reckoned with. Nature is alive and has agency. “Nature beings” play tricks. They can help humans but they will also punish them if humans display destructive or disrespectful behavior. The topic of discussion is not whether these beliefs are true or not – the focus should be on the impact of the myths by which a society or culture prospers.



Sugume Sili from Wasana village, Bosavi

In Bosavi, thanks to ingenuity, spirituality, and resourcefulness, people and nature share a symbiotic relation.

Bosavi is not Utopia. But the low impact of residents on the forest ecology, due to the use of low tech tools, and the refusal to sell their forest thanks to the spiritual connection is the reason that trees still stand today and have not been sold to the highest commercial bidder. The rainforest in Bosavi is highly valued because of its natural and cultural resources (WWF, UNESCO, BBC). And it is one of the most important remaining areas of biodiversity of rainforests in the world. It is unfortunate that the inhabitants of this forest and region receive very little recognition and support for their conservation efforts.

“We bark and we bark like dogs, but nobody listens,” stated one of the chiefs. This project has assisted the community to design a five-step action plan that aims to conserve biodiversity and to improve the quality of life within Bosavi communities.

The first step in this plan is to reach out to the international community. The plea for support will be released in the autumn of 2020. Ambient sounds, bird song, and interviews have been recorded and will be presented. A sound installation and podcast series will be realized once funding has been secured. An essay and a digital Deep Landscape Map further highlight Bosavi ecology and philosophy.

## CHALLENGES FACED

Some challenges faced during this expedition:

- The difficult terrain, the humidity, daily rain showers and the buzzing of insects made it a challenge to capture high quality ambient sound recordings.
- People welcomed Baaijens in their midst. But being a woman in a male-dominated society, it often took an extra effort to accomplish what she came to do.
- Sorcery and jealousy between clans and villages was an issue.
- Predictable unpredictable domestic airline schedules caused much delay.



Bosavi fruits and flowers.



Chief Sigalo at the rim of the Bosavi crater. The uninhabited crater is a biological Wunderkammer. Rare and unique species live completely isolated from the surroundings.

## EXPEDITION FUNDING

Mainly self-funded. The project received two contributions to purchase medicines and a solar panel pack for the Bosavi community. Donors: International Tree Fund and a private donor. WINGS WorldQuest contributed U.S.\$1,000 to the expedition.

## ABOUT THE EXPLORER

Arita Baaijens is a Dutch biologist, award-winning explorer and writer. Thirty years of exploration in wild places taught her that the separation between man and nature is an idea that exists in the western mind only. She connects the arts, ecology and exploration in her practice. And combines fieldwork, innovative cartography and multi-media documentation to revitalize the human connection with nature. She develops a methodology to express "chora" or the deeply felt meaning of places and landscapes.



Old trees provide shelter and are home to different communities of lichens, mosses, insects, orchids, birds, fungi, epiphytes.



Tree kangaroo, Bosavi crater.

## EXPEDITION TEAM

Arita Baaijens, biologist, explorer, writer  
Cor Simon, Dutch landscape architect, joined the expedition for 3 weeks  
Albert Dalilome, Bosavi, bird expert and Bosavi forest guide

## CONTACT INFORMATION:

[www.aritabaaijens.nl](http://www.aritabaaijens.nl)  
[baaijens@xs4all.nl](mailto:baaijens@xs4all.nl)



WINGS WORLDQUEST

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[www.wingsworldquest.org](http://www.wingsworldquest.org)  
[info@wingsworldquest.org](mailto:info@wingsworldquest.org)