

Protectors of the wild

> Discovery Channel's new series *Frontier Borneo* is a tribute to the unsung heroes of the island's conservation effort

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THERE are many individuals and organisations in Borneo who do more than their fair share of work in protecting the wildlife and trying hard to put a stop to illegal poaching and trade activities on this island.

The world's third largest island is home to a multitude of fauna and flora which are in constant danger of extinction due to uncontrolled human activities.

Still, there is hope in the form of dedicated law enforcement officers, scientists, researchers and conservationists who tirelessly work to uncover and protect Borneo's rich biodiversity.

In the 10-episode Discovery Channel series *Frontier Borneo*, we get to learn more about these unsung heroes as the camera follows them on their daily work, which include rescue missions and wrangling deadly creatures across uncharted territories.

The series is produced by Beach House Pictures and Kyanite TV, with the support of the Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA) and the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (Finas).

One of those featured in the series is conservation leader Leo Biddle, who is the CEO of the Orangutan Project which covers both the Malaysian state of Sarawak and Indonesia's Kalimantan.

Biddle, who hails from the United Kingdom, holds a bachelor of science in zoology and has led many humanitarian, conservation and animal welfare projects around the world.

Prior to coming to Borneo, he helped humanitarian groups in Africa and became acquainted with groups working on gorilla and chimpanzee conservation as well as groups concerned with the alarming rise of illegal trade in these and other species.

Biddle founded his non-profit group, Orangutan Project Sdn Bhd, to offer "alternative solutions and sustainable funding opportunities for the endangered wildlife on Borneo".

He currently spends his time developing new projects, creating new non-profit businesses to fund the Orangutan Project conservation work, as well as assisting with the management of the centres to create unique and sustainable revenue streams for the project's conservation goals.

In a recent interview, Biddle shares some insights on his work as shown in *Frontier Borneo*, including taking care of an injured proboscis monkey in one episode and an orangutan

in another.

He says there are few places like Borneo that can boast such huge bio-diversity.

When asked about his penchant for working with apes, Biddle says: "I'm equally interested in animals like sun bears, pangolins and slow lorises but not to get typecast."

"When you start to gain knowledge about a species, you start to specialise. It is just the way the cards have fallen."

"I was always interested in big cats and when I was a child, I loved lions and I thought when I grew up, I would be working on lion conservation."

"It just so happened that I worked with people who were doing great apes conservation and I guess I just fell into it."

Very often, researchers, scientists and conservationists from the West take on a more active role in conservation programmes in Asia.

Does this mean Asians in general don't see this as a priority?

Biddle admits that while the majority of volunteers working in his company's volunteer programmes come from places like the UK, recently, he sees a small number of Indonesian and Malaysian volunteers turning up.

Biddle says there is a



Biddle (above) is one of those dedicated people working to save and protect endangered wildlife like the orangutan (left) in *Frontier Borneo*.



cultural element and also socio-economic reasons for this, adding that if you and the people around you don't have enough food to feed your families, caring for wild animals is not going to be a priority.

Conservationists from the West, on the other hand, generally did not grow up hungry and have easy access to higher education.

"Some countries such as Australia and the UK have a large number of endangered animals."

"We can see how much damage that has caused the eco-system. I think there is a growing awareness that the damage is irreversible."

"There is a growing awareness globally that what happens in Borneo can impact the UK and what happens in Antarctica can also impact Borneo."

He hopes that the western presence becomes a catalyst towards finding a more permanent solution to the problem.

With the series *Frontier Borneo*, Biddle believes that people can understand the world doesn't have to be this way - that it can be better.

"All it requires is a small amount of effort from everyone," he adds.

Frontier Borneo premieres tomorrow at 9.55pm on Discovery Channel (Astro channel 55).