

Muse Opiang

'Saving the Wildlife' in Papua New Guinea

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Imagine looking for an animal that was so illusive, scientists had decided it was impossible to study. Then consider doing this in the most remote rainforests, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea — which means scaling terrain that's slippery from 275 inches of rain a year.

That's what Muse Opiang had been doing since 2001, when after months of searching he finally came upon a long-beaked echidna, a porcine-sized creature that looks a lot like a

spiny anteater. The long-beaked echidna lives only in New Guinea, belongs to a primitive group of mammals called monotremes, and is considered a living link between reptiles and birds to mammals. Over a five-year span, he was able to capture 22 echidna and attach transmitters so he could track them — his ultimate goal to manage and protect the species.

It was a dream come true for Opiang, a field research officer for the Research and Conservation Foundation after graduating from the University of PNG. Today he is a world authority on the

echidna, a biologist working on his doctorate through the University of Tasmania and co-founder of the Papua New Guinea Institute of Biological Research.

Through the U.S.-South Pacific Scholarship Program, administered by the East-West Center, Opiang completed an internship at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in 2007. He was called upon to give presentations on his research of one of the oldest, rarest, strangest-looking creatures on Earth that lives mostly underground to survive.

And the discoveries continue. In early 2009, Opiang and his mentor Kristofer Helgen, curator of mammals at the Smithsonian's Natural History museum, were trekking through a crater more than 8,800 feet above sea level in PNG rainforests as part of a BBC expedition. A local escort pointed out a large rodent on the forest floor — surprisingly tame and unafraid of the two scientists. The three-foot long Bosavi woolly rat is a newfound species. "As biologists, we spend plenty of cold, muddy nights in the rain," Opiang said at the time, "but rarely can we expect to be rewarded like this!"

His dreams go beyond his own research. "I would like to see more Papua New Guineans doing research in ecology and conservation," he says. "We can serve the very remote community through research where government services are lacking. Conservation is not only for 'saving the wildlife' but also 'serving the community.' " ♦

PHOTO: KRISTOFER HELGEN

