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July 16, 2013

6/25/2013 1:28:00 PM

Teachers head to Borneo for conservation studies

Erik Pague
Sports Reporter

Once the final test is handed in and the last bell has rung, a pair of Othello teachers will finish packing their bags and head to the Southeast Asia island of Borneo for a study abroad trip. Miciah and Anthony Marzano will be studying primate conservation strategies and the impact the palm oil industry on the island has on species like the orangutan as part of their master's degree program from Miami University of Ohio.

Miciah, who just finished her first year as a science teacher at Othello High School, and husband Anthony, a special education teacher at McFarland Middle School, will be finishing their second of three summer programs with this trip. Last year, they traveled to Baja, Mexico and both said their program was a great way to combine their love of travel with their desire to get master's degrees.

"I wanted to do some more traveling before I had kids and I also wanted to get my master's degree so this combined the two," Miciah said. "This was a compromise where we could go away each summer and be able to do that traveling together."

With a busy schedule, including work for the school and papers for their degree, the pair said they haven't had much time to prepare for their journey. Miciah said she's confident their previous experience with travels, such as their trip to Baja, will be more than enough preparation for them.

"I feel like every time you travel, you learn something unexpected," Miciah said. "That's the exciting thing for me - I don't know what will come up and what I'll be learning exactly. There are always some surprises."

Their trip is part of MU's Earth Expeditions program and will consist of 10 days of fieldwork where they'll study in places like the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary, which is one of the few places in the world you'll find orangutans. They'll mostly focus on researching conservation strategies to protect these and other primates from a number of impacts, including the production of palm oils - a common ingredient in many foods and cosmetics products.

"Borneo and Sumatra are the only areas that are naturally found and they're a highly endangered species," Miciah said. "Unfortunately, their numbers are decreasing drastically mostly due to the palm oil industry."

Anthony said their trip would also give them the opportunity to stay for three days with a local Malaysian family and learn about their culture. The hope is that this kind of cross-cultural interaction will help establish ways to address the conflicts the local industries have on the ecology of the island.

Anthony said last year's trip to Baja was a life-changing experience and hopes this one will be as well even though he and his wife don't exactly know what's in store for them. They also plan to travel to India and Thailand after their studies are finished in Borneo.

"I was changed completely from my study abroad experience and I wouldn't be the person I am today without having done that," Miciah said. "I encourage anybody to get outside of their comfort zone and see different cultures to expand their horizons. I think it makes you a more well-rounded person."

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