



Above: Swimming with sea lions off the coast of San Cristobel Island, Galapagos, 22 Aug 2009.

WATER WORLD

Aged just 23, James Morgan fought off stiff competition to win the coveted RPS Postgraduate Bursary, enabling him to fulfill his ambition to photograph underwater tribes off the coast of Indonesia.

Rachel Mawdsley catches up on his progress

James Morgan, 23, who is studying for an MA in photography online with the London College of Communication, was the recipient of last year's RPS Postgraduate Bursary of £3500.

Receiving his cheque at the Awards ceremony last November, he headed off in January, to commence the project that the Bursary is to help him undertake: a long term photographic study of the underwater



environment, and the relationships between the humans and animals that inhabit it.

The project stems from his fascination with the idea of a mammalian diving reflex: a basic response in mammals when immersed in water, involving metabolic changes enabling a longer tolerance of apnea (the holding of breath underwater), consisting of a drop in heart rate, a constriction of the veins, and a reduction in oxygen consumption. Tolerance can be developed, and world class competitive divers have been known to hold their breath for more than four minutes. There are societies in various parts of the world that live the majority of their lives in water, and practice this as a basic skill for day-to-day survival.

The Orang Laut, a nomadic ocean-dwelling society

that live between Malaysia and Indonesia, were Morgan's starting point to this study. Having no contacts within the Orang Laut, Morgan prepared himself for the project by studying their language, and by practicing the skill of holding his breath underwater. All that was then left was to head out and find the tribe in its native habitat.

The steady decline in sea nomad populations of recent years provided Morgan with a compelling rationale for the project. Despite the negative figures, Morgan was inspired by the story of the miraculous survival of one tribe, the Moken, in the 2004 Tsunami. They headed for higher ground long before it hit, perhaps due to instinct. Morgan feels that they may have a lot to teach us, due to their close

Top and middle: Sea lions in the shallow waters around Rabida Island, Galapagos, 27 Aug 2009.

Bottom: A pacific green turtle in the waters around Isabella Island, Galapagos, 24 Aug 2009.



Above: Two sea lions off Floreana Island, Galapagos, 23 Aug 2009.

Right: 18 Feb 2010.





relationship with the ocean, which covers the majority of our planet. His interest in the Orang Lut has led him into a study of both their contemporary and historical lifestyles. "Specifically, I want to look at the way in which their traditions and practices, which are fast dying out in the face of increased marine degradation, could hold answers to contemporary global environmental issues", he says.

Morgan wants to lend these peoples credibility in a media environment which, he feels, seems unaware of their value. He says, "I want to use my camera to propel these incredibly important voices into mainstream media, and ensure they are heard by policy makers worldwide."

In addition to this, he wants to use his work to change the way in which we relate to the oceans: "Currently, it is fear and ignorance that governs our relationship with critical marine life, such as sharks and whales", he says. "I hope to bring to light the importance of marine ecosystems, and the impact that they have, in connection with wider environmental issues of global concern."

The next step for Morgan is the exploration of further relationships between humans and the sea. He plans to look at the pearl divers of the South Pacific, specifically Japan, before moving onto other varied diving subjects, such as competitive diving, wreck exploration, and those who dive to produce art from coral.

Morgan is aware of the need to produce work that is relevant to the changing world, and plans to provide an abundance of material from his travels: "I am very conscious of trying to move my work beyond traditional photographic essays", he says, "and I plan to combine video and audio recordings, as well as writing a 'behind the scenes' narrative for an online news agency."

At present, Morgan is based in Indonesia, working on assignments for *The Guardian* and *DestinAsian Magazine*. In addition to this, he is following leads, practicing free-diving, and perfecting his spoken Indonesian, which he hopes will be helpful in undertaking his documentary of the Orang Laut.

Rachel Mawdsley

You can keep up to date with James' progress through his Facebook group <http://tinyurl.com/ydythck>

Or contact him via his website www.jamesmorganphotography.co.uk

The closing date for 2010 RPS Postgraduate Bursary is 30 June

Applications should be sent to Liz Williams, liz@rps.org
For further details, visit www.rps.org