

[News story: UN International Day of Forests 2019: Para-ecologists – the paramedics of the rainforest](#)

Today (Thursday 21 March) marks [UN International Day of Forests](#) and is a time to celebrate individuals working hard to protect the planet's precious trees and forests.

Introducing: para-ecologists, the paramedics of the rainforest. This new generation of data collectors and support scientists – just like paramedics – are proving vital to the overall health of the rainforest ecosystem thanks to projects funded through the UK government's [Darwin Initiative](#).

Since 2001, the [University of Sussex](#) has led five projects designed to train and build scientific knowledge of nature with local people and received almost £1 million in backing from the Darwin Initiative, with some UK aid, over this period.

This includes funding for several projects to help villagers in Papua New Guinea become para-ecologists and protect their country's treasured rainforest. These individuals are now providing vital scientific knowledge that is changing minds on the ground and helping people gain new livelihoods, which is contributing to the protection of some of the world's most important habitats.

This year's event coincides with the government's [Year of Green Action](#), a drive throughout 2019 to help people to connect with, protect and enhance nature – both in the UK and abroad.

Para-ecologist, Joseph Kua said:

I am amazed with the current job I have. I can see that I am really contributing to educating local landowners about the importance of forest conservation.

We carry out biodiversity surveying in the rainforest which is essential to make sure that the area will be protected. If we do not know what is there, then we can't make sure it will be conserved for future generations.

Joachim Yalang, also one of the Para-ecologists, said:

Currently, I am involved in a program in my community which tries to restore forest back to its original state. I am happy that I have a job which involves research and rainforest conservation because it enables me to give back to my community what I have

learnt and make them aware of the importance of rainforest and conservation.

Environment Minister, Thérèse Coffey said:

UN International Day of Forests is a chance to celebrate the wonderful individuals around the globe who are dedicated to protecting our flora and fauna. This initiative reinforces the Government's commitment to protect the most diverse forests for nature and tackle illegal logging.

The Darwin Initiative continues to support hundreds of projects that restore and enhance wildlife and nature. It's another fine example of our support for action at home and abroad to ensure we are the first generation to leave our environment in a better state than we found it.

The rainforests in Papua New Guinea are home to an estimated 25,000 species of plants, along with 760 bird species that are found nowhere else on Earth including the iconic Birds of Paradise, tree kangaroos and many other creatures such as Queen Alexandra's Birdwing butterfly. The projects in Papua New Guinea have raised awareness of nature and the importance of protecting biodiversity amongst the local indigenous communities and led to increasing concern for the long-term future of the rainforest.

With support from UK aid, the UK is driving new, sustainable approaches in some of the world's richest natural environments and most beautiful areas, which both protect the environment and provide quality, sustainable jobs to local communities.

The Para-ecologist initiative has contributed to the establishment of a model rainforest conservation area, which won a [United Nations Development Programme's Equator Prize award in 2015](#).

The conservation area is a community-designated area of forest around 10,000 hectares on the northern side of the island that has been protected from logging by nine neighbouring indigenous clans.

Dr Alan Stewart, Darwin project-lead from the [University of Sussex](#) said:

We use the name 'Para-ecologist' as analogous to Paramedic. These dedicated people are helping us to carry out vital research work on species of plants and animals, many only found in Papua New Guinea.

It is heartening to see that our training programme has impacted local people's lives to the extent that a large area of rainforest is being protected from destruction – by the very people who live there.

Darwin Initiative support has been absolutely essential to establishing these projects and helping to change and shape people lives.

The Darwin Initiative is a grants scheme that helps to protect biodiversity and the natural environment around the globe. Many of the applications reflect the UK government's [25 Year Environment Plan](#) commitments, to secure the benefits of nature for the poorest communities, and to help prevent the extinction of species.

Projects like these are illustrative of the 'win-win' approach encouraging sustainable livelihoods whilst conserving some of the world's iconic and endangered species and landscapes, which benefits us all.