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Training reporters of the environment

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IN A LARGE fish market on Indonesia, a journalist from Jakarta stood with his feet inches away from six baby hammerhead sharks lying on the wet concrete floor, scribbling notes as he interviewed a fisherman.

Nearby, a TV cameraman filmed the vivid action and loud crying of a fish auction. On a large rattan mat inside a low, hot building in Pematang Pasir, in another region of Sumatra, two female reporters from the island's capital, Lampung, spoke with local shrimp-pond workers about their jobs and lives.

Later, with one of the women wearing a baseball cap over her *jilbab*, the traditional Muslim head covering, they followed their subjects across creaking narrow boards laid in the mud as they saw for themselves how the nearby ponds are farmed.

These members of the media were out in the field pursuing stories not on assignment from their editors but from a sense of professional duty. They are members of a group of five leading journalists from Jakarta and 16 local reporters representing radio, TV and the print media who met for a two-day training session entitled "Developing an Environmentally Friendly Coastal Community."

It was arranged by the communications unit of Proyek Pesisir, Indonesia's coastal-management program, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development and implemented in coordination with the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Resources Center.

The seminar had two objectives: to find out what professional journalists need to write factual, informative and interesting stories about environmental issues; and to have members of the media tell coastal-management professionals what challenges they face in telling stories that inform people which issues are important and why they should be concerned about them.

As one trainer described the philosophy, "Put the story in the public's kitchen. Make it something they talk about at the kitchen table, and show how it affects them right where they are sitting."

The 21 journalists have put themselves in the vanguard of members of the media who know and care enough about ecological issues that they want to further educate themselves — and ultimately the public — about these concerns. And no place offers more compelling and immediate natural-resource issues than coastal regions.

That Indonesia has more than 17,000 islands means that the majority of the people are coastal residents, and everything that happens on the coast and neighboring sea will affect their lives in similar ways. For that matter, by 2020, more than two-thirds of the world's population will live within 60 miles of a coast.

The new partnership between environmentalists and journalists reflects what is becoming a trend in places where natural resources are a major part of everyday lives. It is also why the Indonesian exercise was merely the first in a series of workshops that were held throughout the country.

But another example of this outreach took place in June at the University of Rhode Island, the home of Proyek Pesisir's colleagues at the Coastal Resources Center. While Rhode Island is thousands of miles from Sumatra, its residents are also part of a large coastal community, all living within a few miles of the state's largest environmental and economic resource, Narragansett Bay.

Known as the Metcalf Institute for Marine and Environmental Reporting, Rhode Island's journalism workshop brought together reporters from various news media to participate in the same sort of forums, panel discussions, work groups and field trips that marked the exercise in Indonesia, and which helped serve as a model for that international effort.

At the Metcalf Institute, there is a focus on the skills the journalists need to be able to truly understand environmental issues and the science that accompanies them, and then tell a story about the changing faces of natural resources and how they affect lives. In both Indonesia and at URI, these events are also intended to be learning experiences for scientists and environmental professionals. They are meant to explain how to relate a complex story to the media, which will be the voices through which they speak to the public, so as to make sense and be understood by the average person.

Scientific jargon or tortured expressions such as "sustainable development" make little sense to an inquiring reporter or his or her readers. To help participants present their knowledge and expertise to the public with clarity and significance, experts in both Indonesia and at URI try to clearly explain the major challenges that the environment faces, the steps that are being taken to solve problems, and the effects that those actions, or inactions, would have on local economies or water quality.

There are few environmental issues that do not affect every facet of life, and reach directly into everyone's home. Environmental journalists make complex issues understandable, and, in so doing, might improve the lives of people of the coast and elsewhere.

It is common knowledge in journalism that to write a story that catches attention and maintains people's interest, you have to be able to answer the basic question "Who cares?" By enduring the smells and shouts of a bustling fish market and wading in mud up to their ankles in a shrimp pond in Indonesia, or going out on Narragansett Bay on a fishing boat and kayaking down the Narrow River to see the emerging coastal issues firsthand, and then bringing those stories to the public, journalists answer this big question.

Training this new wave of journalists will result in a much more educated and aware populace, in places where public stewardship has been, and will be, the key to successful management of our environmental resources.

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