

VALERIE ARMSTRONG, CONTEXT PARTNERS

# Following the Peatland Path

## THE BACKSTORY

The politics of Indonesian peatlands are fraught: these rich ecosystems lock up vast amounts of carbon dioxide deep below the soil, but agriculture, urbanization, and other disruption above ground leave them prone to fires that pour that CO<sub>2</sub> back into the atmosphere. In this complex archipelago, global climate concerns clash with suspicions about international encroachment and, above all, peatlands' role in local and national economies.

Meanwhile, conservation efforts faced a key problem: there was no authoritative map of peatlands—and you can't protect what you can't easily find. From 2016 to 2018, Context Partners partnered with the Indonesian government and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation to create a prize competition, motivating leading international scientists to devise new mapping techniques for this complex environment.

The prize experience Context Partners designed—from the stories we used to attract participants, to the requirements prize entrants were asked to meet—had to engender acute trust in the endorsed winner, while building a global network that would continue the conservation work long after the winners were announced.

Sirah Pulau Padang locals steer the crew and me along the flooded banks of the Komering River.

**“Our visas were denied, but don’t panic.” Joyce’s words coming over the phone were meant to be soothing, but I was panicking.**

I was days away from filming a story at the heart of our project with the Indonesian government and Packard Foundation—my first of this caliber—and my role just got a whole lot bigger. Not only had I lost my well-vetted film crew, but I’d also lost my director, Joyce. With her visa blocked, capturing the story was now up to me.

“I have a connection in country,” said Joyce. “We’ll get you another crew.” A wave of relief came over me, but the panic lingered. A lot was riding on this story.

“You can only plan so much here.” The voice of my colleague Robert came into my head. As our project lead, he’d already spent hundreds of hours in country researching peatland depletion and its complex effects across the diverse Indonesian archipelago. But plan I did. The footage we captured on this trip would be used to build awareness of peatland conservation among a diverse group of global stakeholders, and authenticity was imperative. We carry a lot of responsibility when we step inside an unfamiliar culture with the intention of fixing a complex problem. Whether we step in as a storyteller (as I was), a designer or a strategist, we do so with an inherent bias. That was my conflict: to tell an authentic story meant showing up with a solid creative vision and a team I trusted to bring it to life.

Weeks before, I’d interviewed Indonesians to learn how peatland mismanagement

and climate change had altered their lives. A few spoke about endangered elephants and orangutans facing deeper peril as their habitats diminish. One shared a startling statistic—in a single day, peatland fires in Indonesia emitted five times the daily average air pollution of the entire U.S. But it was a personal story from Nirarta Samandhi, a conservationist who now directs the World Resources Institute in Indonesia, that stuck with me.

“When I was young, my father would take me fishing at a river near our home. I cherish those memories and wanted to recreate them with my own son. But that river is no longer there—it’s completely dry.” This was the story I’d planned to capture—a shot list and interviews that built from Nirarta’s experience.

Luckily, Joyce’s connection came through—I had a new film crew. I met the local team in Jakarta and we got right to work, capturing footage of the Solutions Showcase event inside a swanky hotel, where 10 teams were presenting their proposed peat mapping methods to the Indonesian Peat Prize judges. My biggest fears were quelled—the crew was a talented, funny bunch and had been briefed by Joyce. We flew together to Palembang, a city in South Sumatra.

In Palembang, we met Mayang, our fixer. A cool-headed Indonesian twenty-something, she introduced us to our local guide, Cobra, an ebullient young fellow who led us to Sirah Pulau Padang, a small village in Ogan Komering Ilir Regency—a remote area in South Sumatra named for the Ogan and Komering Rivers that pass through it.

Lufty, our lead cameraman, looking out the window of our host's home onto the Komer-ing floodplain.



Now, as we drive, I'm struck by how much the landscape resembles the island of Mauritius, my mother's home country. Banana trees bow toward us on bumpy dirt roads. Livestock, dogs, and chickens wander the streets. Families tend to their chores around hand-built homes topped with terracotta tiles, palm fronds, or corrugated metal. Today the sky is blue and clear, a welcome difference from the constant smog around Jakarta, now 300 miles away.

After a two-hour ride, we arrive at the home of our host, a local activist who lives with his family in a wooden house right on the Komer-ing River. The lush landscape belies the description of drought Joyce and I had been prepared for. It turns out the effects of peatland mismanagement can take several forms.

In this village, the story isn't of drought, but of inundation. Our host pulls out a hand-drawn map and explains how years of land mismanagement have affected their way of life. Acacia trees are cut and removed from the peatland dome to make room for palm oil plantations. Complex irrigation canals created to support the palm oil economy have deeply affected existing water flow, fish habitat, and rice cultivation—the crop that has sustained these villagers for generations.

"Let me show you," he offers, gesturing to the back of the house, which opens onto the Komer-ing River. Our crew gingerly steps into canoes with makeshift motors and jerry-rigged rudders.

To the hum of the motors, we probe deeper and deeper into the peatlands, a boggy mush of decaying plant matter sitting deep below the terrain's intricate pattern of islands and

waterways. We stop and meet people along the way—people whose homes are now flooded, who cultivate the little rice they can, and whose daily fishing expeditions yield measly returns. This is what it looks like when you interrupt the natural state of the waterways and peatland to support palm oil plantations. Here, it isn't a story of drought at all.

I take note of the sun—we've been out in the hot, humid, wetlands for hours and sunset is nearing. We must be far from our host's house and getting back won't be easy in the dark. The shallow wetlands are a tangled mess of vegetation that takes skill—and daylight—to navigate. I express my worry to Mayang, who relays it to Cobra. He laughs and tells her something in Bahasa. "He says you should relax," Mayang tells me. I try.

Night falls, and our boat's engine gives out. We're parallel to a road, but there are no street lights and no night-time traffic to light our way. Mayang, Cobra, our host, and the crew chit-chat in Bahasa. I later learn that they suspect the reason for our misfortune is that a "succubus" was pursuing our lead cameraman, Lufty. We neglected to ask the spirits to ensure us a safe journey and now we're paying for it.

By some miracle we sputter back to our host's house. Tired, sweaty, and famished, we sit on the floor and devour a dinner of fish cakes, rice, and bananas prepared by our host's wife. It tastes amazing—a welcome comfort after an adventurous day.

We collapse into heaps, the men sleeping on the floor where we ate dinner, the women crammed together in another room. I close my eyes and hear the whirring of insects and fans. The apprehension I felt at the start of the trip has been replaced by a flood of gratitude.

This journey hasn't gone according to plan at all. *Things will go wrong and you just have to roll with it.* Actually, nothing went wrong. Instead, the story I experienced was one this village lives with every day. Miles away, a different story could be told in another village, and still another story miles from there—this is precisely the point. The effect of peatland depletion is as complex as the landscape itself.

I take a deep breath and let the hum of singing insects lull me to sleep.



A stop along the journey, to visit a man whose home is now surrounded by water year-round, since water can no longer naturally move in and out of the Komer-ing floodplain with the tides.



VALERIE ARMSTRONG is a visual designer and strategist with Context Partners. In her work, she pushes for creative and inclusive methods to capture the complex, interwoven cultures of the communities with which she works. She envisions a world where every designer, and every design, contributes to equitable solutions to real, human problems.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Stay flexible.** Keep your biases at bay so the real story can emerge.
- **Complex problems have complex storylines.** Be cautious about oversimplifying.
- **Step inside their lived reality.** Doing so will almost always produce a better solution.