

# TROPICAL RESEARCH INITIATIVE

of Victor Valley College



15 June – 9 July 2011

## Surveying for Amphibians and Reptiles in Lautém District, Timor-Leste

a celebration of cultural and biological diversity featuring Mark O'Shea

**15 June–9 July 2011**

Thank you for your interest in the Summer 2011 edition of the Tropical Research Initiative field trip to Timor-Leste.

Included in this brochure is a lot of information about the Tropical Research Initiative, the trip itself, the course options for academic credit, the costs involved, and some financial options. I hope that this information will help you decide whether you are going to join us on this Animal-Planet-meets-Survivor type adventure.

### **What is this trip all about?**

I have been running tropical research experiences for undergraduates for over a decade. After initially taking along highly qualified individuals to assist me in my research, it dawned on me that these trips were of considerable use to those who participated since it gave them hands-on experience on the science trajectory, from fieldwork to publication—and this helped them make career choices and enter graduate programs. Their participation also helped make each trip to an exotic locale more profitable in terms of the research. My students also saw parts of the world that might be inaccessible to most, and they experienced the honest beauty of places and people without the filter of a traditional arranged tour.

I began taking several students at a time to field locations in Honduras, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste, and I created a course to provide some academic rigor and permit credit transfers. Using fieldwork as an academic “lure” it happens more often than not that the cultural aspect of the course captures your passion and makes this a truly life-changing experience.

If you find that you have questions after going through the information (and that would be normal), please email me first ([kaiserh@vvc.edu](mailto:kaiserh@vvc.edu)) so that when we talk on the phone I can provide you with a well-reasoned response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mark O'Shea'.



- **COURSE NAME** International Natural History—Natural History of Lautém, Timor-Leste
- **COURSE NUMBER** BIOL 98
- **GENERAL INFORMATION** This 4-semester-unit course, coordinated and led by Drs. Hinrich Kaiser and Mark O'Shea, will be offered through Victor Valley College during the Summer Session of 2011. This course is designed to let students experience the tropical environment of Timor-Leste (East Timor) in Southeast Asia from a fieldwork and research perspective, and to combine this with a cultural perspective on the new country of Timor-Leste and on Singapore, one of the world's most famous and cosmopolitan cities. The fauna of Timor Island is still poorly known and the island is situated at an interesting crossroads of Australo-Papuan and Southeast Asian elements. An emphasis will be placed on amphibians and reptiles and their adaptations to life in tropical forests, because they serve as an excellent example for the high diversity of vertebrates in this region.  
BIOL 98 is a course without prerequisites that can be taken for credit or not. Registration will be only by permission of the instructor.

- **INSTRUCTOR**



Hinrich Kaiser's research experience in the tropics includes 15 years in the Caribbean and northern South America and nearly a decade in Southeast Asia. His over 60 peer-reviewed publications and his editorship of an international journal form a body of work that was recently recognized by his election to the prestigious Linnean Society of London, England. At Victor Valley College, Dr. Kaiser teaches General Biology.

- **CO-LEADER**



Mark O'Shea is consultant curator of reptiles at West Midland Safari Park, England, an accomplished author of books on amphibians and reptiles, and a TV presenter whose series on herpetological fieldwork are seen on the Discovery Channel and on Animal Planet. Mark's continuing academic research interests center around the herpetofauna of Papua New Guinea and snakebite research in that region. He is a sought-after speaker whose knowledge of science and history make him a perfect field companion. He was the recipient of the prestigious Explorers' Club of New York (British Chapter) Millennium Award for Services to Zoology.







## • PREPARATION



*Academic Preparation.*—Before departure in June, there will be several preparatory exercises, primarily based on readings and handouts provided electronically. These exercises will need to be returned by specific deadlines. Topics will include the geography of Southeast Asia, the biogeography of the Lesser Sunda region, basic knowledge of reptile and amphibian anatomy and natural history, the fundamentals of fieldwork, the preparation of a travel notebook, and the culture of the visited countries.

*Health Preparation.*—Traveling to and in Timor-Leste can be exhausting. Furthermore, there are justified concerns about tropical diseases, including dengue fever and malaria. As a consequence, I emphasize the need for good overall physical health, adequate fitness to endure hiking in a hot, humid environment, and a sense of personal responsibility when it comes to malaria prophylaxis and a first aid kit.

*Equipment Preparation*—When traveling on any trip, packing is a really important task. It is not only *what* to pack, but *how* to pack that can make a big difference to the enjoyment of your trip. Therefore, one warning up front: *Do NOT overpack!* We will do a lot of traveling around, and you are personally responsible for your gear. You must ensure that the weight of your larger piece of luggage is  $\leq 20$  kg (44 lbs)! I mean it! You will be responsible for any excess baggage fees incurred on your own bags. Experience has shown me that I have to write some strong language at this point or nobody will take it seriously.

One piece of checked luggage and one piece of carry-on (a backpack and a camera bag/purse/fanny pack) are all you are allowed to bring. Pick luggage pieces that reflect what you will be doing, recognizing that travel in the tropics requires sturdy gear (i.e., suitcases are not a good choice to lug around the tropics). I have traveled in over 100 countries and have determined that some luggage pieces simply don't work. Let me make a couple of recommendations.

Your check-in bag should ideally be of the **roll-aboard** type, no larger than 24" tall, with **roller-blade** type wheels and a **sturdy wide handle**. If you do not have such a bag, it might be a good investment. I also recommend attaching your own nametag to the bag rather than using the flimsy airline-issued ones you get at the airport. If you want to use locks to protect the luggage from being opened, use locks that the Transportation Security Association (TSA) can open; otherwise, they will cut your locks open and you will lose your protection. I am less worried about those who steal than having my luggage come open during handling. I usually close my checked luggage with small plastic zip-ties. Large duffel bags are a pain to lug around, and they are generally less sturdy (even if we tape them repeatedly with duct tape). The same goes for big backpacks. There are some really cool roll-aboard type bags that are also backpacks, but those are pricier.





- **PREPARATION** (cont.)



As carry-on luggage, please bring a regular “student-sized” backpack. This backpack should allow you to carry most of what you’ll need during a day of travel or fieldwork. I also advocate bringing along a smaller bag for shorter tours or hikes. I personally like a fanny pack since it minimizes the surface of my back that will be soaked in sweat. My fanny pack comes with two water bottles and it has enough space for snacks, camera, binoculars, and other things I need. Remember that there will ALWAYS be the need to carry your drinking water. Don’t allow yourself to become dehydrated.

- **GRADING**

There are five main components to the grading scheme for BIOL 98: the pre-departure exercises (10%), your best fifty (50) photos with short descriptive paragraphs (25%), your field/travel notebook (25%), a final exam (15%), and participation (25%).

*Pre-departure Exercises.*—These are reading-based and will generally consist of short answer questions. They must be submitted via email by the time indicated, or you will lose points. These are serious exercises to evaluate your preparedness for this course. You need to know the basic information before we go since we will not have time to explain everything all over when standing on a jungle trail.



*Photos and Captions.*—This is your after-trip writing exercise. You select fifty photographs, all of different subjects, edit them for optimal composition, and put them on a CD-ROM in .jpg format. You also have to submit on this CD-ROM a Word document with written captions for each photo. These captions should detail 4 Ws (what, when, where, why) about the subject and each should be no less than 50 words long—make it fun! The due date for this exercise is 31 July 2011.



*Field/Travel Notebook.*—The field/travel notebook is like a diary, to include all aspects of the natural history, the culture, the geography, or other topics we cover. Notebook writing will begin with our departure from LAX and end on the last day in Singapore. Notebooks must be completed and submitted to me upon arrival in Los Angeles.







- **GRADING** (cont.)

*Final Exam.*—The final exam is a written, short-answer exam based on the lectures and discussion held throughout the trip. Your notebook and the amphibian and reptile report will form your knowledge base for these questions. Part of the exam may be conducted as an oral exam in the field.

*Participation.*—This is not a throw-away category. During fieldwork, we depend on each other for assistance and companionship, and your performance will be evaluated accordingly. There are five equally weighted categories. These are **Enthusiasm**—your general attitude displayed throughout the course; **Effort**—the way you tried to complete assigned tasks, including hikes, spotting of animals, etc., measuring “try,” not “success”; **Lab Participation**—your participation in specimen prep activities, i.e. were you attending prep sessions, were you paying attention, eager to do the work, and did you volunteer your time; **Preparedness**—an assessment of whether you brought the necessary equipment to each excursion, and whether you came mentally and physically prepared (an attitude check); and **Social Interaction**—an assessment how you integrated yourself into our team and how you interacted with the team.



- **LOGISTICS**

There is two-tiered pricing for this trip. Those associated with Victor Valley College benefit from a subsidized cost of US\$ 3795. Others pay the unsubsidized cost of \$5795. This price includes international airfare from Los Angeles\*, airport and airline taxes, all transport, accommodation (usually double rooms, but sometimes a little more rugged), meals (incl. non-alcoholic beverages), tours, entry fees, travel insurance, and visa fees. The trip price does not include tuition (in-state: \$104, out-of-state: \$864), transfers to/from LAX, prescriptions, personal effects, trip cancellation insurance, and passports. Those interested must submit a completed application package **by 2 May 2011**, and if accepted into the course must make a \$1500 deposit by 9 May 2011. You must also submit a photocopy of the ID page in your passport (**the passport must be valid for at least 6 months beyond the end of the trip**). Due to booking restrictions, the initial deposit is **nonrefundable** and trip cancellation insurance is therefore recommended. The remaining funds are due by 27 May 2011. Please make checks or money orders payable to Time4Travel.

\* Should other arrangements be necessary, the unsubsidized cost can accommodate travel from airports in North America and Europe.





**TENTATIVE SCHEDULE** • The following is a detailed, but tentative schedule for the trip. Please note that despite my best attempts to arrange things exactly as they appear here, travel to and in Timor-Leste comes with its surprises. Thus, rearrangements of the trip's timing ( $\pm 2$  days) and schedule have happened in the past even though the events essentially remained the same. Regardless, it'll be an unforgettable experience!

**June 15** • We meet at Los Angeles International Airport, Tom Bradley Terminal (Terminal B). If you are planning on flying into LAX, please leave enough time to transfer terminals. We'll meet and greet, and check in as a group. This helps with baggage screening and seating assignments.

**June 16** • We depart for Singapore in the early am with a stop somewhere in between (usually Hongkong, Seoul, Taipei, or Tokyo). This will be a loong flight, and my recommendation is to drink, eat, watch a movie or two and then sleep. For those of you who have trouble sleeping on planes, I take an Ambien (a sleeping pill) to help me out, and I have found it to work well. Use of a sleeping pill during the nights when jetlag might wake you up in the middle of the night can be a great advantage.

**June 17** • We arrive in Singapore in mid-afternoon, with the buzzed feeling of jetlag. We'll quickly transfer to our hotel and no doubt shower and eat. On this evening, there isn't much to do other than have some dinner and go to bed. We'll get a crack at Singapore at the end of the trip.

**June 18** • In the morning, we take the 3½-hour flight to Dili, Timor-Leste, where we'll stay at the Timor Lodge Hotel near the airport. We'll retrieve our equipment, and check and repack everything. The rest of the afternoon is at your disposal. Dili is easily accessible via taxi, so you can stay in town, walk along the beach, and do a little sightseeing. Or, you may consider resting up and taking a swim in the hotel's pool. In the evening we'll have a dinner at our hotel during which we'll meet the Timorese students who will accompany us.

**June 19** • This day is our first full day in Timor-Leste, and in addition to preparing our equipment, we will have a 3-h field excursion to get everyone going. This will be a trip to a small village along the Comoro River near Dili. After a briefing about the day's plans, we'll ride our Troop Carrier 4x4s and drive upriver. We ease into the research phase because we will be jetlagged!

**June 20** • Today is a necessary staging day, when permits will be obtained, food will be purchased, and equipment will be repacked. We will ensure that everything is ready before heading out to the far east of the country.

**June 21** • We depart on the long drive to Lospalos in Lautém District, no doubt with many stops along the road in order to turn over rocks and look for animals as well as to identify and photograph any roadkilled specimens.

**June 22** • We begin fieldwork in earnest in the area around Lake Ira Lalaro, the largest body of freshwater in Timor-Leste. The lake is home to a snake-necked turtle, one of the world's 25 most endangered turtles, as well as to an interesting landlocked population of saltwater crocodiles. We are particularly interested in the various limestone caves in the area as well as in some of the most pristine forests in this part of the world.

**June 23–July 3** • We will continue our survey work in Lautém District, exploring the area thoroughly. Other than some incidental collecting by Australian researchers, this area has never been surveyed properly.

**July 4** • In the morning, we depart for Baucau, where we will spend the night. The rice paddies around this town have been very productive for us for snakes before, and it would be a shame to pass up an opportunity to take another look.

**July 5** • Today marks our return to Dili, and in the evening we will complete any specimen photography and preparation that still needs to be done. We will begin to clean and put away our field gear, and start packing up.

**July 6** • This is the last day in Timor-Leste, and it will be at your disposal. During past visits, the team was invited by government leaders, so it is likely that we will finish our work on a festive note.

**July 7** • After packing up, we depart at 3.30 pm for Singapore.

**July 8** • Today is your free day in Singapore. There is lots of opportunity for shopping, sightseeing, and just taking in the atmosphere. We will have our final dinner by the Singapore River on Harbor Quay.

**July 9** • Our flight departs in the morning and will get us back into LAX on the same day, some 20 h later.







## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**How fit do I need to be?** Travel in the tropics is challenging to begin with, and the effects of long travel days and long hours of fieldwork during the day and at night compound this and drive the body to exhaustion. Those of us who have done this help manage your needed rest, but there is a lot you can do before we even leave. Take the weeks after you are accepted into the program and begin an exercise regimen. You don't have to be a crack athlete, but we want to make sure you have a good time.

**What is the minimum/maximum age for participants? What is the general age range?** Since these trips are tailored to the needs of college students, the minimum age for participation absent a parent or an older sibling is 18. There is no maximum age, and our oldest participant was very fit at age 64. It is normally people in their early 20s who go.

**Do these units transfer to other colleges and universities?** Since Victor Valley College is a University of California and California State University feeder school, transfer credit is usually granted more widely. As each case is different, I think the most prudent course of action is to review the syllabus with the Office of Instruction at the transfer school ahead of time and obtain a determination in writing that this course will be acceptable. For anyone who has tried this so far, these courses appear to have counted as a lower division science elective. Most majors don't need a lower division science elective, but because of the travel and the cultural aspect, it has at times been counted like a geography course, which in some places counts as a humanities class. In this way, the students were able to use it not just as units. So, it all depends.

**Can I use my financial aid to pay for this? Is this a tax-deductible education expense?** This trip is a course at Victor Valley College and financial aid money, GI Bills, student grants, or student loans can all be used to cover this educational expense. In some cases where financial aid does not apply, it can be used to offset income on a tax return. With all of this, check with your financial aid counselor or your tax professional before making any assumptions.



REGISTRATION APPLICATION FORM • BIOL 98  
due 2 May 2011\*

INTERNATIONAL NATURAL HISTORY: SURVEYING FOR AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES IN  
LAUTÉM DISTRICT, TIMOR-LESTE

Dates: 15 June – 7 July 2011

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

I hereby request a slot in BIOL 98 during Summer Session 2011 at Victor Valley College.

I understand that this 4-unit course will take place in Timor-Leste. I understand further that travel cost of this trip is US\$ 3795 (subsidized) or US\$ 5795 (unsubsidized). Included in this amount are: international airfare from Los Angeles<sup>§</sup>, airport and airline taxes, all transport, accommodation (usually double rooms, but sometimes a little more rugged), meals (incl. non-alcoholic beverages), tours, entry fees, travel insurance, and visa fees. Not included are tuition (in-state: \$104, out-of-state: \$864), transfers to/from LAX, prescriptions, personal effects, free time activities, trip cancellation insurance, and passports. Those interested must submit a **completed application package** by 2 May 2011, and if accepted into the course make a \$1500 deposit by 9 May 2011. When making your deposit, you must also submit a photocopy of a valid passport or of your submitted passport. Due to booking restrictions, the initial deposit is nonrefundable and trip cancellation insurance is therefore recommended. The remaining funds are due by 27 May 2011. Please make checks or money orders payable to Time4Travel.

In order to help us select a strong team for Summer 2011, please answer the following questions and submit your responses with this form on or before 2 May.

- (1) Why are you interested in fieldwork in Timor-Leste?
- (2) What can you add to a team that conducts fieldwork in the tropics?
- (3) Why, at this stage of your life, do you deserve to be selected for our team?

I will require financial aid to pay for this trip.      Yes               No

I have a valid passport.                                      Yes               No

I have taken/I am taking a General Biology course.      Yes               No

By signing this form I am formally applying to register for this trip.

**IMPORTANT:** Since this trip involves international air travel it is essential that the following information will allow us to reach you right away.

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_                                      Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_                                      Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\* Please note that I will be accepting registration forms on a **first-come first-served** basis.

<sup>§</sup>The unsubsidized fee can include airfare from anywhere in the North American or Europe.