# Coping on the Coast: moral economy and liminality at the heart of things that matter

This Geography Matters piece by Dr Johanna Wadsley was developed from a research expedition she undertook as co-recipient of the *RGS-IBG 2012 Nevill Shulman Challenge Award*. Prior to coming to the Open University to study geography at postgraduate level, Johanna trained and certified as a wilderness expedition leader (NOLS, USA). The Neville Shulman Challenge Award, which she shared with project partner Dr Duika Burges Watson (Newcastle, formerly Durham), enabled her to bring her love of expeditioning together with her academic interests. The research expedition was called “*Hugging the Coast: an exploration by sea kayak of liminal living in the Sangihe Archipelago, North Sulawesi, Indonesia”.*

The photographs in the audio-slideshow were taken by expedition members Vonna Keller and Lena Conlan.

The asset resonates most especially with the concerns of Open University Module DST206 *Environment: Sharing a Dynamic Planet*, *Book 1, Introduction, Life, Water.* The second part of this asset, to be released in the Autumn of 2017, links the Sangihe Archipelago to the Norfolk Coast; East Anglia is the focus of Block 1 of DST206. The second part will draw on the materials produced by the OU’s *Sounding Coastal Change* research project led by Dr George Revill; Dr Wadsley currently works as the Postdoctoral Research Associate for *Sounding Coastal Change* ([www.soundingcoastalchange.org](http://www.soundingcoastalchange.org)). Johanna has also worked on the Module Teams for Environment: journeys through a changing world (U116, Block 3: Nile Limits) and Earth in crisis: environmental policy in an international context (DU311).

**Expedition overview**

In August 2012 an international team of six women – two social scientists, two professional sea-kayakers and two marine science students from Sam Ratulangi University, Manado – journeyed the 150+ nautical mile length of the Sangihe archipelago, North Sulawesi, Indonesia. Travelling by sea kayak and motorized support boat, they visited approximately 20 remote island communities, met with elected community leaders, conducted semi-structured and in-depth research interviews with individuals and groups, and observed and visually documented the state of seaweed farming in the archipelago as well as other forms of coastal livelihoods. They also considered what ‘liminality’ might mean in that context. At present, most Indonesian farmed seaweed ends up as an invisible ingredient in Western processed food and health products, but its natural carbon sequestration properties renders seaweed an increasingly important 'climate smart' agricultural product of the Coral Triangle. The islands and their communities are geographically positioned at the heart of one of the world’s most significant ‘hot spots’ for marine bio-diversity and marine resource wealth, as well as multi-lateral political efforts to manage the Coral Triangle as a site pivotal to climate change adaption. Yet the hopes and fears of these coastal peoples are suspended between patchy regional and national government schemes to promote economic development as well as manage an increasingly vulnerable marine environment, and their own village-specific endeavours to ensure a sustainable future on the island, in the village, with its people.

As the title of the project indicates, we were interested in the lives and livelihoods of the archipelago’s liminal zones, particularly the role of seaweed farming. We wanted to explore the region as a team of women, by sea kayak.

**Liminality**, in terms of the meaning it had for the project, characterizes the oft-overlooked places, the way that inshore reef areas are neither land nor sea, the way that communities in the Coral Triangle are both remote and yet at the heart of things that matter in a global sense, particularly with regard to the effects and impacts of climate change.

We wanted to investigate **seaweed farming** for a number of reasons. Firstly, the expedition built on Duika Burges Watson’s previous research looking at seaweed as a community development strategy and public health commodity. Seaweed is an important marine agricultural product exported from the Coral Triangle to the rest of the world. At present, most Indonesian farmed seaweed ends up as an invisible ingredient in Western processed food and health products that are consumed on a on a daily basis. Broader reasons for considering the state of seaweed farming in the region are that seaweed is also an increasingly important ‘climate smart’ agricultural product produced across the Coral Triangle, otherwise known as the ‘Amazon of the Seas’ for its immense biodiversity.

*Hugging the Coast* was also about a team of women undertaking a research expedition **by sea kayak.** For those members of the team experienced in wilderness expeditioning around the world (Johanna Wadsley, Lena Conlan, Vonna Keller), the project was an opportunity to see what difference it makes when human beings are as much a part of the environment and landscape as, say, the sea or the mountains. In terms of the kayaking goals, it eventuated that conditions were not conducive to kayaking the entire length of the archipelago with a team that included novices: shifts in the East and Australasian monsoon pattern meant that it was too dangerous to attempt the inter-island crossings. The research was conducted across the full geographic area because of the support boat, Tropica. That said, the project was a success because of the kayaks: most of the villages would have been impossible to reach in the support boat due to the shallowness of the reefs – in those situations the kayaks were essential to gaining physical access. The kayaks also proved to be essential research tools in that they opened up conversations with the people we met on the islands, not least because they challenged local gender perceptions about the sea.

## The kayaking & research team

Dr Duika Burges Watson (UK/AUS), Dr Johanna Wadsley (UK/AUS), Lena Conlan (Sweden/USA), Vonna Keller (USA/AUS), Arny Caroles(INDO) and Jacqline Laikun (INDO)

## Tasik Ria Support crew, ‘Tropica’

Jeldy ‘Didi’ Waldy, Alex Tendeken, Carroll Pelealu

## In-country relationships

Professor Grevo Gerung, Sam Ratulangi University (UNSRAT). Head of the Marine Science Department and Deputy Dean of Collaboration Affairs and Evaluation.

Tasik Ria Resort, Spa and Diving, owner Daniel Gondowidjojo

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