Climbing the Giants

He doesn't hug trees – he climbs them as part of his work to ensure their survival for future generations. **Hana Miller** meets the man who recently traveled around Indonesia fulfilling a childhood dream to document the country's tallest trees.

Ninety-nine percent of the work we do is helping trees and people live together," says Will Koomjian, an arborist from Portland, Oregon, and co-founder of Ascending the Giants, a series of expeditions intended to increase knowledge and awareness about "champion trees", the largest of each species.

For almost five years now, Will has worked as a tree climber, maintaining trees on public and private properties in the city. For the past two years, he and Brian French have led independent research into Oregon's champion trees and are coordinating their findings for the state's archives.

In early 2009, Will embarked on a long-awaited solo trip to Indonesia, with plans to visit forests in Sulawesi and Kalimantan in search of the remaining ancestors of one of the planet's most prehistoric families of trees, the evergreen coniferous *Araucaria*.

"When I first started thinking about this project, I looked for what I could find about conifers in Indonesia, and I found just about nothing," says Will. "My hope is that if anyone else is looking, then they might find my work."

Back from his first foray, Will is already making plans to return to Indonesia and take his research to the next level, to climb the trees he found and to document their canopy life. But first he takes a moment to tell us how he found his way around the forests the first time around and what he discovered there:

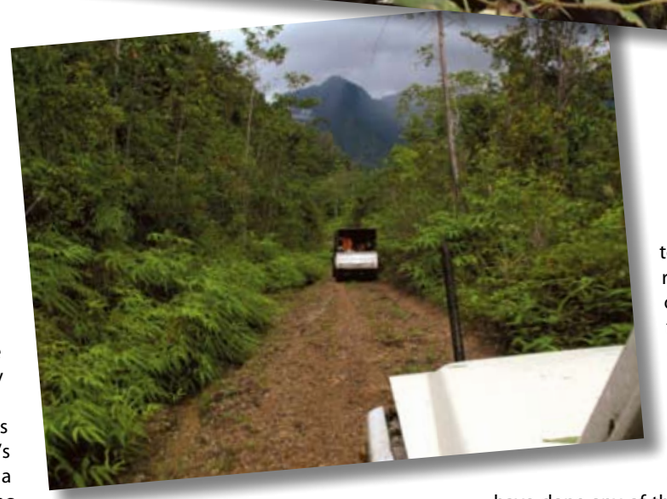
What I wanted to do with this trip, and this was the first foray, was to get a better idea of what these *Araucaria* family forests look like in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Their counterparts in Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Chile, Brazil and New Caledonia are really famous. You do a Google search and they're everywhere, these amazing epic photos of forests that look like they're out of the time of the dinosaurs, and they literally are.

Because they emerged as the dominant trees across much of the world during the time of the dinosaurs, and they've changed very little since then. They're real living fossil trees. The same way that a Komodo dragon is an animal that has changed very little in millions of years, these trees are the equivalent of that.

I wanted to see what these forests look like and also use my skills in measuring to try and find some of the best groves and to take photos and measurements, which I do from the ground with a laser and diameter tape and all that stuff. Basically to create my own little catalogue of what these places look like.

Part of the motivation is, there's no telling what's going to happen over the next 50 years with those places. A lot of these trees could be 600 or 700 years old, but they might not be around for 25 more years. I want to at least be able to say we have photos and we can see and know what they looked like. There is no photographic documentation of these trees out there for people to see. So that's my motivation for this project. And this is really only the first step. I'm already planning to go back in 2010 and I'd be perfectly happy to keep going back and keep chipping away at it.

It's coming out of the same place as Ascending the Giants, but it's sort of my independent quest. I really hope that someday we could put together an expedition to go out and climb in one of these groves and take measurements and photos from the canopy, to show what canopy life in those areas is like. That would be amazing.



Where?

I traveled to the *Agathis philippinensis* forest found in Kalimantan. That was up at about 1,600 meters in the interior, in a heath forest, which is an area that has really poor soil for the other trees that grow there, so they have these specialist plants like *Agathis* that grow where other species don't like the soil. I also went to the *Agathis dammara* forest in eastern Sulawesi, and that's the tree that they harvest Dammar from, the tree sap that they use for just about everything. I went around with these folks harvesting Dammar and that was really amazing. They love the Dammar trees. It's not just another tree to them, because they sell Dammar and they buy rice. It's their livelihood.

The area in eastern Sulawesi is the Morowali Nature Reserve. It's set up as a nature reserve but also a reserve for the indigenous *orang wana* who live there and are very dependent on the things they gather from the forest. The area in Kalimantan is not a reserve, it's actually privately owned, though from what I've heard, it's just too expensive to access so it seems unlikely that it will be logged.

How?

The folks from the Nature Conservancy who work out in Kalimantan were really helpful. When I first got there I met up with them and they made suggestions about where to go and how to get there.

Other people I talked to were usually pretty confused. If I tried to explain my whole story, I would often just get a confused stare back. So depending on who I was talking to, I would just say I was a tourist who wanted to see these trees because I thought they were cool. I'd leave out the fact that I wanted to measure the trees and take photos for a project I was working on.

Or I would just tel them I was a tree researcher, and leave out the stuff about the fact that I wasn't doing this for a PhD or some institution. I spent a while at language school in Yogyakarta. I don't think I could have done any of these things if I didn't speak Indonesian.

Why?

I've always been fascinated with Indonesia. I've wanted to go since I was just a kid. I've always really liked looking at maps. And when you look at a map of the world, for me anyway, I would always look at Indonesia and think, "What goes on there?" What's even better is that you just don't hear much about Indonesia in the States. And that just makes it that much more interesting.

Also, these specific trees don't grow over most of the Earth's surface. They used to exist on all the continents, because they go back to when there was one super continent. But Indonesia probably has the most species of *Araucaria* over the largest range. Nobody really knows. There is a lot of debate about which ones are species, et cetera. And that just reflects how little is known about these trees and how so few people know anything about them at all.