



SUMATRAN ORANGUTAN CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

from CONFISCATION  
to SOCIALISATION  
and REINTRODUCTION





## SUMATRAN ORANGUTAN CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

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## Background

PanEco's Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme (SOCP: [www.sumatranorangutan.org](http://www.sumatranorangutan.org)) is a collaborative programme involving our partners; the Indonesian Yayasan-Ekosistem Lestari (Foundation for a Sustainable Ecosystem), Germany's Frankfurt Zoological Society (who manage SOCP's orangutan reintroduction centre in Jambi Province) and the Indonesian Government's Directorate General of Forest Protection and Nature Conservation. It is a multifaceted programme engaged in all aspects of Sumatran orangutan conservation including:

- a) Rescue, quarantine and reintroduction of illegal pet orangutans back to the wild;
- b) Surveys and monitoring of remaining wild populations;
- c) Research on conservation and behavioural ecology of wild orangutans;
- d) Habitat conservation;
- e) Conservation education and awareness raising.

A major focus of the work of the SOCP is the confiscation, quarantine and reintroduction back to the wild, of confiscated illegally held pet orangutans. This requires the continuous operation of the SOCP's orangutan quarantine centre near Medan, North Sumatra.

Construction of the quarantine centre was completed in 2002 when the first orangutans moved in. This was followed in January 2003 by the first successful reintroductions of Sumatran orangutans back to the rainforests of Bukit Tigapuluh National Park in Jambi Province, located in central Sumatra. Since then more than 200 orangutans have been received at the quarantine centre and over 130 of these have already been transferred to Jambi for reintroduction, forming a new, viable wild population of this Critically Endangered species in an area where they became extinct as much as 150 years ago.





Orangutans are the largest arboreal (tree living) creatures on earth. They also have the longest inter-birth interval of any land living animal, producing a single infant only once every 8 or 9 years. Since they produce their first infant at age 15 and live to 50 or 60 years old in the wild, a mother orangutan may produce and raise only 4 or 5 babies in her lifetime. Orangutans generally, just like humans and chimpanzees, are also well-known for possessing unique forms of culture. Different populations have traditions and specific “ways of doing things” for no reason other than that is how they learned to do them from their parents and peers. In Sumatra, in the swamp forests of the West coast of Aceh for example, the orangutan’s culture extends as far as regularly and routinely making and using tools, to obtain honey from bees nests and to extract the seeds of the rock hard and extremely itchy *Neesia* fruits that grow there.

The Sumatran orangutan (*Pongo abelii*) is a unique species, quite distinct from its relative the Bornean orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*). Today there are considered to be only 6,600 wild Sumatran orangutans remaining, compared to more than 40,000 Bornean orangutans. Furthermore, these 6,600 are already fragmented into at least 10 smaller sub-populations, all of which occur only in the two provinces of Aceh and North Sumatra, Indonesia.

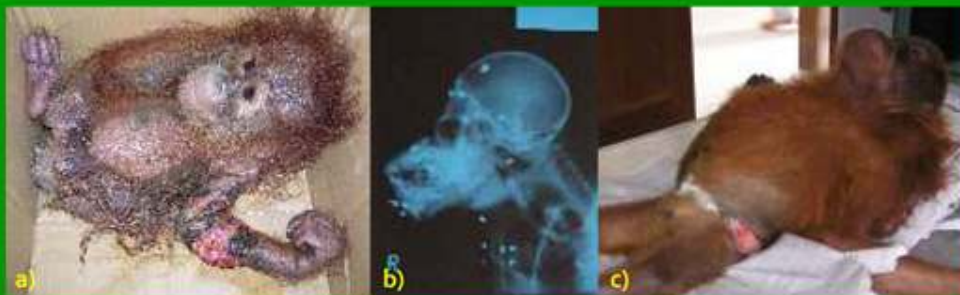
As a result of their precarious status the World Conservation Union (IUCN) currently lists the Sumatran species as Critically Endangered in its red list of threatened species. Both Sumatran and Bornean orangutans are also listed on Appendix 1 of CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

Within Indonesia itself, orangutans have been formally protected by law for many decades. It is in fact illegal to capture, kill, keep or trade them (UU No. 5/1990). Despite this, all 4 of these activities continue, due to inadequate enforcement of wildlife laws generally within Indonesia.

The SOCP works closely with the Indonesian authorities in an attempt to address this problem. We are constantly investigating cases of illegal capture, keeping and trade in the species and regularly confiscate the animals. Our next task is to work to ensure that more prosecutions of the illegal "owners" of these orangutans occur. Often the confiscated animals have been very badly treated in captivity. They are frequently in poor health and sometimes also have horrific injuries.



Illegal pet orangutans are normally either caged or chained to a tree or similar. Ironically, around 70% of those confiscated in Sumatra were being kept by police, military or local government people; the very people who should be responsible for law enforcement.



After confiscation, orangutans arrive at the quarantine centre in a variety of conditions. Some have been quite well looked after by their previous owners and are relatively fit and well. Others may be suffering horrific injuries. These three orangutans were: a) attacked by a dog at owners house, b) with over 60 air rifle pellets in his body as a result of capture, and c) with serious wounds and paralyzed by tetanus due to a chain around his waist that slowly dug into his body as he grew bigger.



# Quarantine

After confiscation, the orangutans are brought to SOCP's purpose built orangutan quarantine centre at Batu Mbelin, near Medan, North Sumatra.

Current facilities at the centre include a fully equipped medical clinic, 16 quarantine isolation cages, a unit of much larger "socialization" cages (for orangutans that have successfully passed their quarantine period), and 4 long-term cages for a few special individuals that for reasons of health or disability cannot be released in the foreseeable future.

The veterinary clinic at the centre (right) and one of the quarantine isolation cages (below) where all new arrivals must spend at least the first 30 days.



Very young orangutans that still need to be fed milk from a bottle are initially taken care of 24 hours a day by a special caretaker, even sleeping next to them at night. As they build up their strength and confidence they are slowly introduced to each other and start the process of learning that they are in fact little orangutans, not strange, hairy humans. As they grow they spend less and less time with people and more and more time with other orangutans until eventually they too are old enough to be released to the forest again.

Older orangutans, that are already used to spending most of their time alone (as many have done for several years) are first placed in the centre's quarantine cages where their health is assessed and they are treated if necessary.



On arrival at the centre, all orangutans must undergo a minimum 30 days quarantine isolation period. At the start of this period they undergo full medical checks during which they are anesthetized, and samples are taken for testing to check for signs of illness and disease. Routine tests include:

- a. Chest X-rays to test for TB;
- b. PPD Tuberculin tests for TB;
- c. Blood tests for hepatitis A, B and C, herpes simplex virus and routine haematology;
- d. Faecal parasite checks;
- e. Urinalysis.

X-rays, blood sampling and surgery on orangutans at the centre.



Thorough testing and treatment of any ailments that we find are essential to ensure the health of the newly reintroduced population. Orangutans share 97% of human DNA and can catch and pass on all of the same illnesses and diseases that people can. Wild orangutans are generally healthy and live to a ripe old age, but once captured and brought into captivity they readily contract diseases and parasites from their new owners. These illnesses tend to be exacerbated by the very nutrient poor diets they are fed and the dirty and unhygienic conditions in which they are kept, and they are seldom if ever treated for health problems. In fact, every orangutan the SOCP has ever received has arrived with a very high parasite (worm) load, probably picked up from their previous owner and their family. Luckily intestinal worms are relatively easily treated, but for these reasons we have to ensure that all of the orangutans are in excellent health and fully fit before

they are returned again to the wild.

This is to minimize the risk of also releasing diseases and parasites they have picked up from humans, and infecting the wild primates already living there.



In addition to medical checks, all of the orangutans are:

1. Photographed (portrait and dentition);
2. Fingerprinted;
3. Tattooed with an individual code number;
4. Micro-chipped (a small chip with a unique code is injected under the skin).

These procedures ensure that we will always be able to accurately identify and monitor the progress of every individual that is received, even after they have been successfully returned to the wild. Along with its own code number, each orangutan also has its own behavioural and medical records. These are constantly updated and allow us to continuously learn and to update and improve our management of the animals as necessary.

Tattoos are given and fingerprints taken as part of the routine medical check procedure, to aid identification and record keeping.



# Socialisation



After their quarantine period and any necessary treatment, the orangutans are introduced to each other in the large socialization cages (below).



Once an orangutan has passed its health checks and quarantine period satisfactorily it is then transferred to some large socialization cages at the back of the quarantine centre. Here they are gradually introduced to other orangutans. In most cases this is the first time they have met another orangutan since the time of their capture, when their own mother was killed.

It is in these much larger cages that they really begin the process of learning what it is to be an orangutan

again. Firstly they have to learn how to communicate and get along with their new friends, but they also have to learn to defend their food and look after themselves too in this new more "competitive" situation. Essentially they need to learn all the social and behavioural skills, or "orangutan etiquette", that they will need to survive in the rainforest when eventually released.

When orangutans are first transferred here from their former isolation cages they are initially placed in a small side-cage, near the larger cages but not touching them. From here they can see, hear and smell the other orangutans but stress is kept to a minimum as they cannot yet touch each other. After some days of this they are then allowed into an adjacent cage, from which the orangutans can touch and grapple with each other for the first time. They are then observed closely by their caretakers and if all goes well, after a few days they are finally allowed into the same cage with each other. By adopting this very gradual, step-by-step process, stress is kept to a minimum for all concerned and the introduction process goes as smoothly as possible.



Transferring orangutans from the Medan quarantine centre to the reintroduction site in Jambi is always a long and exhausting journey for both the orangutans and SOCP staff. Nevertheless, despite the challenges faced en route it is also extremely rewarding, as once the orangutans arrive at their new home in the forest the reintroduction process can really begin.





## Reintroduction

Once "groups" of compatible orangutans have been established in the socialization cages, they are then transferred by road or air to the SOCP's reintroduction site at the edge of Bukit Tigapuluh National Park in Jambi Province. Travelling together as a "group of friends" helps significantly to reduce the stress of the journey, and of adjusting to the new environment. SOCP staff from the quarantine accompany them too, for the same reason. On arrival they are once again placed in large and spacious cages, almost identical to the large socialization cages they have just left, only this time deep in the heart of the rainforest.

All of the facilities at the reintroduction centre are located deep in the forests, at the edge of Bukit Tigapuluh National Park, Sumatra.



After they have settled, the younger and more manageable ones can be taken out of the cages on a daily basis, to explore and learn directly about life in the trees, but returning at night with their caretakers. The larger or more aggressive individuals on the other hand, must remain in the cages longer. They must learn as much as possible of the knowledge and new skills they need before they get their chance to be free. In their case, the staff collect naturally occurring foods and nesting materials from the forest and bring it to them, so that when they are eventually released they already know what is food and how to eat it.

At this stage, experienced caretakers regularly assess the progress of each orangutan individually. Once considered likely to be able to survive in the wild without too many problems, the orangutans are then transported to a suitable site and are finally released. SOCP field staff then continue to monitor their progress on a daily basis, observing and recording their behavior and food intake from dawn to dusk, until satisfied they are managing to cope in the forest by themselves. Even then field staff continue to note all encounters with orangutans in the forest, recording who they saw, their location, behavior and body condition during all such encounters, such that over time we continually to update ourselves on each orangutan's progress.



Monitoring and protection of the orangutans after their release is an essential part of the process (top). Reintroduced orangutan Santi (above), with her daughter Suci, conceived and born in the wild after Santi's release in the forests of Bukit Tigapuluh.



## The Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme also:

### Promotes Habitat Protection in the Tripa swamps

The 3 coastal peat swamp forests of Aceh contain the highest densities of orangutans anywhere in the world. Despite conversion of some parts for oil palm production, the Tripa swamp still hosts a population of around 280 wild Sumatran orangutans, representing one of only 6 remaining potentially viable populations of the species. PanEco and YEL are working hard to protect this important Sumatran orangutan habitat.

### Promotes habitat protection in the Batang Toru forests

The Batang Toru Forests, totaling 136,284 ha in North Sumatra, are home to the southern-most naturally occurring viable population of Sumatran orangutans. They also harbor populations of Sumatran tiger, clouded leopards, bears, tapir, serow and a host of other rare and endangered species. YEL and PanEco work with local stakeholders to prevent destruction of this important orangutan habitat and critical watershed for surrounding human populations.

### Is active in conservation ecology, surveys and monitoring of wild Sumatran orangutan populations

With local, national and international universities, as well as other local organizations and institutions, PanEco and YEL carry out important surveys and monitoring of remaining wild Sumatran orangutan populations and strive to ensure the continuation of long-term studies of their behavior and ecology in the wild at the well known Ketambe and Suaq Balimbing research stations in Aceh, and in the Batang Toru forests of North Sumatra.

### Conducts education and outreach activities in support of orangutan and rainforest conservation

PanEco and YEL operate mobile education units that regularly visit communities living next to orangutan habitat, delivering talks and presentations and distributing leaflets, brochures, posters, stickers and other materials. Education staff visit schools and other institutions and have been working with the RARE centre to implement PRIDE campaigns focusing on Aceh's west coast swamp forests.







Donations can be made in US Dollars to:  
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If you would like to find out more about our work and  
how you can help us please visit

[www.sumatranorangutan.org](http://www.sumatranorangutan.org)

or contact us at one of the following addresses:

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