

# Carles Puyol recovering from leg surgery!?

*By*

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I wonder how the above headline might go down with fans of Barcelona Football Club? Somewhat alarmingly I'd expect, since he is after all one of their star players. But relax and rest assured, we are talking about an orangutan here, not the Barcelona and Spanish national team defender. An orangutan was recently named after the famous football star by staff of the Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme (SOCP) in recognition of his support for the cause of orangutan conservation (see [www.actnowfororangutans.org](http://www.actnowfororangutans.org)).

## **Background**

On December 15<sup>th</sup> 2011 we received information from Krishna, of the Orangutan Information Centre (OIC; <http://orangutancentre.org>), regarding an orangutan that appeared isolated and lost, roaming around in an area of mixed trees and rubber plantations near the village of Bukit Mas, in Besitang, about 3.5 hours north of Medan. It turned out that the orangutan was a fully cheek-padded adult male, obviously malnourished and weak after some time away from the 'proper' forest, and seemingly alone. Previous visits to the same area by OIC staff had never found any orangutans, and so its quite possible that this particular adult male was getting on in years, and trying to avoid conflicts (fights) with other, younger and fitter adult male orangutans elsewhere, and that this was the reason he'd become disoriented and lost so far from the forest.

Whatever his reasons for being there, it was quickly apparent that if this orangutan was not captured and removed from the area he would be killed by local villagers. Despite the fact that it

is illegal under Indonesian law to kill an orangutan, its abundantly evident that hundreds, if not thousands, are still killed every year, due to conflicts with farmers near the forest edge (as in this case), or as companies clear forests (and all the wildlife within them) for the expansion of large scale plantations. Indeed, many local villagers had already gathered below this orangutan and had been following him closely for several days, shouting and throwing sticks and stones at him to try to scare him away. Some of them had even been shooting at him with an air rifle before we arrived on the scene, evidenced by the pellets we later found in his body.

### **Rescue**

Drh Rachmad Wahyudi and Syahrial from the SOCP met with Krishna, and Pak Sudirman from the local Conservation Agency, on 17<sup>th</sup> December, and immediately went to the orangutan's location to assess his situation and attempt a rescue. This was far from easy. Firstly the remaining trees in the area were high, many of them more than 30 meters tall, and when orangutans are frightened they normally tend to climb as high as they can. Secondly, there was a large crowd of people watching, and shouting, and generally getting in the way, and this was clearly also upsetting and panicking the orangutan. At first Rachmad tried to dart him using the blowpipe, but he was always too high and the darts kept falling short. Eventually, however, after trying all day and just as they were about to give up and return to Medan, Rachmad had the idea to try to fix the blowpipe onto the end of a regular air rifle and shoot the dart that way. Of course this provided extra power, but it was also much less accurate. Nevertheless, with a little luck on his side, Rachmad did eventually manage to hit his target and a full dose of anesthetic went in. Ideally, we would always have proper anesthetic rifles available for jobs like this, but at the present time we simply don't have one. We have tried to import them in the past, as donations to the provincial conservation agency (i.e. the Indonesian Government itself) but unfortunately they have been confiscated and impounded by the infamous Medan customs. There are plans to try again, this time via the Ministry of Forestry in Jakarta, and we very much hope we are successful this time, not least for cases just such as this one.

As noted, darting the animal is not the only challenge when capturing a wild orangutan. By far the biggest concern is what happens next, the subsequent fall to the ground. Orangutans almost always climb higher if they are shot at or darted, and it's necessary to try and slow their fall from

the trees by using a large net, held and stretched out by several strong people underneath. Normally it takes as much as 10 minutes or more for the drugs to take effect, leaving plenty of time to prepare and position the net, but in this particular case there simply wasn't enough time. Just a couple of minutes after the dart went in (possibly faster than normal due to the stressed and malnourished condition of the animal), the orangutan fell 25 meters to earth with a loud thud, before the net was anywhere near him. Rachmad and the others were very worried at first, thinking he could be dead, or paralyzed, as a result of his fall, for example if he'd broken his spine or neck on landing. But fortunately, on checking they found him still alive and as far as they could tell, still fully functional. They then administered precautionary antibiotics, vitamins and pain-relievers, before placing him in a transport cage and waited for him to wake up again before heading to the SOCP Orangutan Quarantine Centre at Batu Mbelin, near Medan. It was on the way there that Rachmad and Syahril decided to name the new orangutan 'Puyol', in honor of the Champion's League winner and 'champion' of orangutan conservation.

### **Examination**

On arriving at the centre that night and releasing Puyol from his traveling cage, it was clear that there was some kind of injury to his right lower leg. He was holding it off the ground and refusing to put weight on it. It also seemed that it would bend very easily, suggesting a serious break. He had already been through enough for the time being, however, so he was given a few days to relax and rest and build up his strength a bit before we disturbed him again. We also wanted to know if he would eat foods that in theory he had probably never encountered before, such as bananas, oranges, tomatoes and pineapples, but we needn't have worried about that, he relished everything he could get his enormous hands on! He'd obviously been starving for quite some time!! Then on 20<sup>th</sup> December, Puyol was anesthetized for an x-ray and overall check up, and from the x-ray we could see very clearly that indeed both the Tibia and Fibula in the lower leg had been snapped in two as a result of his fall.

### **Surgery**

We discussed Puyol's situation with our good friend Dr Andreas Messikommer, the Swiss surgeon who had worked on many human cases here and in Aceh after the 2004 tsunami, and who has since helped us with several difficult orangutan surgeries, the most recent being the

amputation of Seumayam's forearm and the repair of Marco's dislocated and broken humerus in October (see <http://www.sumatranorangutan.org/webautor-data/39/SOCP-report-Andreas-Surgery-Oct-2011-compressed.pdf>). Fortunately for Puyol, despite the holidays (or more accurately, 'because' of the holidays), Andreas was available to fly over once again to help the SOCP vets drh Yenny Saraswati and Rachmad with the operation. So on December 28<sup>th</sup>, Andreas once again arrived at Medan airport and on the 29<sup>th</sup> the surgery was performed. For Andreas it was largely a relatively straightforward operation, realigning the two halves of the Tibia and fixing them in place by means of two metal plates, to produce a finished product that will soon be as strong, if not stronger, than before the accident. The leg was then bundled up in a cast that sets hard after being soaked briefly in water. On the other hand, we all agreed that it would be worth removing one of Puyol's lower canine teeth at the same time, as this was badly infected and almost certainly causing poor Puyol some considerable pain and discomfort. This was not such a routine job for Andreas, being normally the domain of dentists, but after a quick phone call for some advice and guidance with Dr. dent. Luc Balmer in Switzerland, Andreas managed to break up the infected tooth with a surgical chisel and hammer, remove all the remaining fragments, and close the remaining (rather large!) hole with a flap of mucous membrane folded over and stitched in place from, and into, the surrounding gums.

All in all it took about 4 and a half hours for both procedures and all were in need of a rest the next day, especially Puyol! We were hoping he would take it easy, and not try to break his cast or poke around too much in his mouth, and luckily he obliged. He looked quite sorry for himself the day after his surgery, obviously still in some discomfort (although of course he was given some pain relief), and very much 'hungover' from his lengthy anesthesia. Still, he took his medications no problem and the next day was much better, 'wolfing' down whatever soft foods (to avoid damage to his gums) we gave him. The cast is also still on, even several days later, so we expect the operation to his leg is healing as well as we could have hoped. In a few weeks we'll remove the cast and x-ray the leg again, to see if this has indeed been the case.

## **Conclusion**

Puyol's story is an interesting one. Here in Sumatra, during the most intense years of civil conflict in Aceh, between 1999 and 2005, there were relatively few areas of forests being opened

up for plantations or by local farmers, and the SOCP was seldom asked to relocate displaced orangutans isolated from the forests. In the least 2 or 3 years, however, we have received an increasing number of requests to rescue and relocate orangutans trapped or isolated away from the forests in the region. Often these incidents can be traced to particular land owners or companies, but it is very rare indeed that those actually creating the problem, those actually clearing the forests, offer to help rescue and relocate these orangutans, or to help fund their capture and care during the process. It's often been suggested in the press that companies should contact the NGO's and wildlife authorities when clearing forests containing orangutans and assist in their capture and relocation. The implication in most such press articles is that to them, the companies and their directors, the problem is then solved and everyone is happy, including the orangutans. But the reality is far different. Most orangutans are displaced, accidentally or even deliberately killed, much earlier in the land clearing process, well before a few lucky survivors are found to have become isolated in a remaining patch of trees and are in need of rescue. What's more, as is well demonstrated by Puyol's case, the very act of rescue is itself extremely dangerous for the orangutan. They can easily fall many metres to the ground and can easily break bones, become paralyzed, or even be killed in the process. It would be far easier, cheaper, and safer for all if plantations simply did not clear any more orangutan habitat, and new plantations were instead located on already deforested land, of which there is an abundance in Indonesia. Capturing them and relocating them every time is a dangerous, expensive and certainly unsustainable alternative that should only be carried out as absolutely the last resort.

**A very malnourished Puyol shortly after capture, being put into a transport cage for the journey to the SOCP Orangutan Quarantine Centre near Medan.**



**X-ray taken on December 20<sup>th</sup>, showing clearly the breaks in both the Tibia and Fibula below the knee. The white mark in front of the Fibula is an air rifle pellet, flattened on impact with the bone. Several similar pellets have been removed from Puyol's body and he could well have several more still inside him.**



**Andreas (centre) with drh Yenny (left), measuring up the metal plates to be used to fix the break, whilst drh Rachmad (green shirt) and quarantine staff look on.**



The two plates already fixed in place and the wound ready to be stitched up.



**Close up of Puyol's teeth, showing the infected lower left canine prior to removal, and also the obvious wear and tear of his other teeth, leading us to believe that Puyol is probably at least 40 years old, and possibly even as much as 50 or more.**



Stitching a flap of skin from the gum to cover the hole left by the tooth.



And finally, fixing a cast on the leg to reduce the risk of Puyul damaging it during healing.

