

**Personal Observations On Orangutan Conservation**  
**by Karl Ammann**  
**Nov. 10, 2008**

I've just finished a film shoot, with a German television crew and a print journalist, which took us to several locations in Western and Central Kalimantan. Our objective was to investigate and document the current conservation status of orangutans indigenous to these areas.

We chartered a plane to fly from Palangkaraya to Pangkalanbun which used to be one of the strong holds of the orang utan in the Central Kalimantan region. Soon after flying over the BOS ( **Borneo Orang Utan Survival Foundation**) Center at Nyaru Menteng, we could clearly see where huge areas of swamp forest had recently been bulldozed for oil palm plantations with other areas having been flattened to make way for illegal gold mining . The deforestation continues all the way to Tanjung Puting National Park, then resumes along its northern border on the Kumai River.

This kind of deforestation is indicative of what is also occurring in West Kalimantan, and to some extent in the east as well. On the Malaysian side of Borneo, in Sarawak and Sabah the story appears to be the same with , many of the same companies, under Malaysian ownership and using Malaysian capital, now moving into the Indonesia side of Borneo.

I had been visiting Kalimantan on an almost annual basis since the mid 1980's up to about 5 years ago. My favorite location for photographing the red ape, in a relatively natural setting, has been Tanjung Puting National Park. The resulting photographic coverage has been included in two titles on great apes (produced with co-authors), as well as in Orangutan Odyssey (Abrams, 1999) by Dr Birute Galdikas featuring my photography.

**Eco-tourism**

I had however not been back to Tanjung Puting for five years, before this opportunity arose to return, and I was shocked at how much more commercial we found it. Prices at the park's Rimba Lodge and for boat charters have tripled since my last visit, and the orangutan feeding sites are now crowded with the "kloktok" tourist boats.

These feeding sites were originally set up to supplement ex-captive orangutans which were being re-introduced to the forest and still had to learn to forage on their own. Now, however, they appear to be provisioning adult animals as well, ones which should no longer require supplementary feeding. Thus the primary purpose of the feeding platforms now seems to be for the benefit of tourists seeking an up-close orangutan photo-op in an artificial setting complete with visitor seating areas, cordoned-off view points, and signs full of instructions and warnings – however no real information on the conservation issues affecting the orang utan populations or the new oil palm fields next door.

While eco-tourism has been touted as a panacea for many conservation projects, the number of visitors to Tanjung Puting has increased to the extent that, in my opinion, the quality of the overall experience has drastically diminished. At such a point, instead of offering a solution eco tourism often becomes part of the problem as has been seen in many of the more prominent national parks in East and Southern Africa.

On the way to Indonesia I read in an inflight magazine a story about an orang utan rehabilitation center on Sumatra. It states; ‘ The center no longer takes in new captive orphaned orang utans as the forests around Bukit Lawang are nearly saturated with rehabilitants which is a real testament to the centers success.” I would classify filling the last patches of forests which orphaned apes as a major failure in terms of overall conservation objectives. Then no longer being able to deal with the still incoming orphans and the corresponding animal welfare as well as conservation issue, I will touch on later.

The piece concludes stating: ‘By allowing close human contact in a controlled way will not only increase the understanding and appreciation of these endangered animals but also increase the desire to protect them for future generations as well”.

If that is one of the objectives of eco tourism, in this and other parts of the world, then where is the success?

## **Lip Service**

The Project Manager of an orangutan conservation research project in West Kalimantan informed us that Borneo's population of red apes, 100 years ago, is estimated to have been 2 million. Today the latest census data indicates that a maximum of 50,000 remain, and these only in relic populations so fragmented that their genetic viability has become a conservation concern. This would strongly suggest that, despite the last 30 years of active conservation efforts – plus the new additions of eco tourism - and millions of dollars having been spent on trying to protect Asia's only great ape and it's forest habitats, nothing has worked.

A telling examples of this failure, in my opinion, is the "Tanjung Puting Declaration" signed by the world's leading primatologist in 1991, which has long been, and still is, proudly displayed in the dining room of Tanjung Puting's Rimba Lodge. It states:

WE, THE CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS, WHO HAVE STUDIED AND WORKED TO  
PROTECT THE GREAT APES...

**RECOGNIZE**

THE EFFORTS EXPENDED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF INDONESIA TO PROTECT THE  
ORANGUTANS...

**RESPECT**

THE QUALITY OF NEW INDONESIAN LEGISLATION DEALING WITH ENVIRONMENTAL  
ISSUES AND NATURAL PROTECTION

**SUPPORT**

THE SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENTS OF INDONESIAN EXPERTS...

**APPRECIATE**

THE SUPPORT GIVEN BY THE INDONESIAN GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS...

**ACKNOWLEDGE**

THE PROBLEMS FACED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF INDONESIA TO CONSERVE  
BIODIVERSITY.....

The reality is, however, that more forest destruction has been taking place in Central Kalimantan than in any other ape habitat in the world. Around the time this declaration was signed Indonesia spent millions of dollars from it's "Reforestation Fund" to clear-cut a huge tract of primary peat swamp forest in Central Kalimantan, for something called "The Rice Bowl Project" which, in the end, was never completed. Indonesia is cited today in The

Guinness Book Of World Records as the biggest destroyer of primary rainforest in the world, with some estimates suggesting that forest is being lost at a rate equivalent to 300 football fields every hour. Indonesia has also become the third largest emitter of CO<sub>2</sub> due to this clearing of primary rain forests.

During the late 90s and the early parts of this decade, I regularly documented illegal logging activities taking place **along almost the entire length of the Sekonyer River, which forms the park's western border** . The park's Probiscus research station was demolished and looted by loggers, who then used the station's jetty as part of their riverside infrastructure. Within the park , an entire villages had been constructed, complete with a mosque with shining domes.

The port of Kumai was at the time home to many active saw mills and lumber yards, where dozens of ships could be seen being loaded with illegal timber. Today, however, this activity seems largely a thing of the past, for reasons which have less to do with enforcement or conservation efforts and more with the fact that the valuable Ramin timber has been depleted, the big bucks earned. Now the raw material for Indonesia's numerous paper mills is supplied by the clear-cutting of millions of hectares of what is now mostly secondary forest, advanced by the new kid on the block - the palm oil industry.

When I first saw reports of the “Special Palm Oil Working Group” included within the minutes of The Great Ape Alliance, I knew that things had to be bad. I did not, however, expect them to be disastrous and, possibly, already beyond hope.

Clearly, whatever the Indonesian authorities have been saying in terms of being committed to protecting Kalimantan's forests has not resulted in any effective actions being taken on the ground. Rather, it appears to amount to little more than lip service having being paid in order to give the international community what it wants to hear. Meanwhile, the behind-the-scenes policy seems to be: the faster the remaining forests can be converted into plantations the less possibilities for descriptive international media coverage.

## Orphans

The lack of political will, combined with a willingness to window-dress and deceive, is now manifestly affecting the survival of Indonesia's few remaining wild orangutans, as well as the welfare of the approximately 1200 orphan orangutans residing in the country's sanctuaries. It is patently obvious that these orphans would not still be coming out of the forest at these rates if any progress were being made as far as halting the forest destruction. Each orphan, in my opinion, is an advertisement of the failure of the various conservation efforts.

Besides Sumatra, Borneo's lowland rainforest is the orangutan's only other indigenous habitat on our planet

In the past considerable efforts were made to provide orphaned orangutans , a second chance through rescue projects offering sanctuary, rehabilitation and, ultimately, reintroduction into protected areas. (Several times, in **the late 90s**, I stumbled across baby orphans being illegally held in various locations in Central Kalimantan. After reporting this to the BOS Sanctuary Management in Waniraset , some were successfully confiscated and rehabilitated .)

Many of the big conservation players, having access to serious funds to apply to issues they consider conservation priorities, make the argument that the funding it takes to rehabilitate captive orphans would be better spent on protecting habitat for those remaining in the wild. In doing so, however, they overlook the fundamental fact that every orphan represents a failure on their part to protect the wild populations in the first place. Given the present situation, it seems that the flow of orphans will decline only at the rate the wild populations decline and no longer produce them. Based on this track record should we trust these conservation conglomerates with suddenly finding an effective approach to deal with these issues.?

It seems that the concerned and educated public of the developed world has come to a general acceptance that we are unable, to address the problem of uncontrolled and unsustainable development within such poorly governed countries as Indonesia. As such, one humane alternative is to

focus on the plight of the orphans, even if giving them a second chance limits them to a life in semi-captivity. Therefore considerable funding has been made available to take care of great ape orphans throughout Africa as well as Indonesia and some extend Malaysia.

As consumers of a large percentage of Indonesia's illegally harvested timber (much of which imported as finished products from China), as well as a wide range of products containing palm oil ,we , the consumers in the west as usual bear quit a bit of responsibility in arriving at this stage. Since we seem to have a problem curtailing the consumption side of it and push for better and more responsible governance in the countries concerned we feel the occasional check to adopt an orphan here or there is part of a way to make up.

In my opinion this is a mopping up exercise and has little to do with conservation but is basic animal welfare responsibility we have when it comes to our closest animal relatives.

However even on this front things seem to be now changing for the worse as well.

### **Transparency**

The media team I was traveling with wanted to film the BOS Nyaru Menteng Rescue Center where some 600 orphans are being held awaiting rehabilitation. However, the BOS application for a filming permit entails a daunting three page list of requirements, including CV's of all team members, health certificates, HIV tests, a full outline of script and story angle, and an explanation of how the film project will benefit BOS, "...and it's efforts to help save orangutans". The camera man stated that this was far in excess of what they'd had to do to film aboard a U.S. nuclear aircraft carrier during The Gulf War. The print journalist (who was also a producer) asked if he could visit without the film crew, but was told that he would have to submit an outline and "story board" of his intended piece. This he considered "totally absurd" and the worst form of censorship he had ever encountered.

After making a few phone calls, we established that the board of BOS is now comprised mostly of ex-government officials doing the bidding for the authorities. The result being a media access policy structured in such a

way as to allow to exclude any proposals not portraying happy endings and an overall positive slant. Apparently this has been deemed necessary based on the fact that media teams have regularly used the orangutan's plight as a vehicle to telling the wider story of unsustainable development and forest destruction combined with the drastic increase in CO2 emission. Thus the powers that be, seeking to curtail this kind of exposure, and seemingly in collaboration with the palm oil industry lobby groups, have come up with demands for documentation which will allow them to in turn use this red tape to control future media coverage.

## **2015**

Unwilling to accept these censorship rules, we abandoned our plans to visit the BOS rescue center. Rather than pursuing the story of rescued orphans, we decided to focus instead on the story behind those orphans still awaiting rescue. In the West Kalimantan town of Ketepang we found five young orangutans awaiting transfer to one of the official rescue centers, in solitary confinement within dark cages, to which they had already been confined for three months. Local forestry officials told us that the sanctuaries were now considered full and this was the first time they had encountered such a delay in transferring confiscated orphans.

Also in Ketapang we were told, by a representative of foreign conservation NGO, that they had submitted a list of 20 illegally held orangutans to Forestry officials with the hope of having them confiscated. They too confirmed that, because no sanctuary space was available, further confiscations were deemed pointless. A local conservationist who later tried to locate the orphans on that list told us that most had already "disappeared"... It seems this is now the latest approach to 'solving the problem' of illegally held orphans.

In Pontianak we visited two adult orang utans held illegally in small cages in a garbage area of a residential estate. They have been there for years and as usual with adult animals they are much harder to confiscate and relocate than small orphans. After a recent escape their cages have now been welded closed. The message again seems to be they will never

again leave these cages. Our local guides estimated that there are between 50-100 illegally held orang utans in Pontianak alone.

"The Strategic Plan" for the conservation of the remaining orangutan populations, which was presented by Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono at the 2007 Bali Conference, embedded within a wide range of lofty goals and declarations, makes it clear that Indonesia's target is for all orangutan rescue and rehabilitation centers to be closed by 2015. Many of the world's largest conservation organizations have signed on to this plan and are cited on its title page. The conclusion has to be that sanctuaries which are expected to close down in seven years will have their hands more than full to find new forest patches for rehabilitation and then getting the 1200 orphans now awaiting relocation back into a natural setting and as such it should not be surprising that a bottleneck concerning new arrivals is developing. However confiscation relocation represented about the only aspect of any kind of effective law enforcement in the context of orang utan protection there ever was. No longer accepting orphans and no longer confiscating any means officially ignoring the law of the land ( an orang utan can only be legally held with a specific authorization of The President of the Republic of Indonesia) and sending a loud and clear message: The Orang Utans have become too inconvenient.

### **Trading of Orang Utans and Conservation**

In 2006 the CITES Secretariat and the Great Ape Survival Project (GRASP) mounted a joint mission to determine why large numbers of orangutans were being illegally exported and turning up elsewhere in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. One point the corresponding report makes is that there has never, in the history of independent Indonesia, been a successfully prosecution of any poacher having killed an orang utan or anybody for illegally holding one. Clearly this lack of political will in enforcing national laws protecting endangered species is hardly conducive to productive conservation efforts. Indeed, the CITES/GRASP answer to the problem of orphan orangutans was: to ship them to foreign zoos or euthanasia. The UN body specially established to protect the last remaining great apes concludes that in case of the orang utan there is little hope and potentially a dead orang utan is the best solution

I fail to understand the logic behind the message which conservation NGO's attempt to convey to local villagers, that wild orangutans in the forest comprise a valuable resource, while illegally held orphans (captured after their mothers have been illegally killed) no longer have any kind of value – they are classified as already genetically dead.. At least the occasional confiscation in the past, served as a reminder of the government's official stance regarding law enforcement and wildlife protection.

### The future

On the ground in Kalimantan, the situation appears hopeless. In the larger economic scheme of things, the orangutan now seems to amount to little more than an inconvenient nuisance, the sooner gone the better. The facts are:

- orphans are still appearing in numbers
- it has become close to impossible to film or photograph the large numbers of apes now held at 'rescue centers
- recently confiscated orphans are stuck in half way houses
- no more confiscations seem to be taking place
- the government has decided that all sanctuaries and rehabilitation centers need to be closed by 2015

Clearly, the efforts of both the conservation and now the animal welfare establishments have failed and are failing. While million of hectares of Indonesia's secondary lowland forests are being replaced by palm oil plantations, no new areas are being allocated for the rescue and rehabilitation of the hundreds of homeless orangutans. Apparently the conservation community wields no real clout on any level. The sooner we accept the fact that whatever the past approach was (Tanjung Putting, Kinshasa declaration etc.) has failed and that unless something drastically changes all the efforts of the past will amount to having lost 'by one less goal'.

It appears that the orangutans of Indonesia will be the first of the great ape populations to go extinct in the wild with a few, genetically no longer viable, relic populations hanging on in some forest patches. The projections of experts of this occurring within the next 20 years might, in fact, be overly optimistic. It is no longer a subjective question of seeing the glass half full or half empty - it is obvious that the glass is indeed empty, of all but the last few drops.





