



# *Help Save The Orangutan*

*By Michelle Walker*

Currently, these beautiful, shy and intelligent great apes are on the critically endangered list. They are in grave danger of becoming extinct within the next 10 years unless we all come together to fight for their survival.



Photo courtesy of Tim Peach

**T**he orangutan was once found throughout Southeast Asia, but now the species only survives in relic populations in Borneo and Sumatra. Recent estimates suggest that wild orangutan numbers could be as low as 50,000. Orangutan populations have declined by 50% over the last 10 years and their habitat by 80% over the last 20 years.

The word 'orangutan' is Malay for 'person of the forest'. The orangutan is 97% genetically the same as humans and has the intelligence of a 5 to 6 year old child. Orangutans are shy, solitary animals that are active during the day and build nests to sleep in at night - these are made from leaves and are high up in the trees. They live alone in large territories - probably due to their eating habits. A large portion of the orangutans diet is fruit and if there are too many trying to feed in one area this may lead to starvation. The only real social group is the mother and her offspring who live together for around 8 to 12 years. When mating the male and female usually only stay together for a few days. The female is capable of giving birth from 12 to 15 years and usually has only one baby about

every 8 years. The mother and baby have a very strong bond and the baby depends entirely on its mother for nourishment, protection, to learn what to eat and where to find food, how to climb and swing through the trees and how to make a nest. The orangutan is estimated to live for about 50 years in the wild.

The single most significant threat to the survival of the orangutans is the expansion of palm oil plantations. The beautiful rainforests, in which the orangutans live, are being cleared at an alarming rate. Plantations in Indonesia have expanded from 600,000 hectares in 1985 to an estimated 6.4 million hectares this year. According to the UN, "The natural forests of Sumatra and Borneo are being cleared so fast that up to 98% may be destroyed by 2022". This is due to high world demand for palm oil, which is used in products such as biofuel, cooking oil, chips, chocolate, biscuits, margarine, toothpaste, soap and much more.

Many consumers are unaware that they are purchasing products containing palm oil as the label usually only states vegetable oil or palm oil derivatives. As the orangutan's forests are disappearing so is their food supply.

This then causes them to go onto palm oil plantations in search of something to eat. The orangutans are then killed by the land owners or the farmers as they are considered to be pests.

As the forests are being cleared and the land burnt to make way for palm oil plantations this is also a major contribution to global warming. Biofuel was developed with the intention of being a greener fuel but bio-diesel containing palm oil is anything but green. Palm oil is high in saturated fat and low in polyunsaturated fat. Research indicates that the consumption of palm oil increases the risk of heart disease and should be avoided in your diet. This is difficult to do when manufacturers aren't required to label it.

Another significant factor in the decline of the wild orangutan population is the illegal pet trade. Orangutan mothers are being killed so that the babies can be stolen from them and sold as pets. Unfortunately it is estimated that only one out of four babies will survive this experience.

Other issues affecting the orangutan are legal and illegal logging



for timber and pulp for paper, and also gold mining. Even National Parks and protected areas are being deforested by illegal logging and mining.

Fortunately, there is a group of volunteers working very hard to try and save the orangutans and they belong to the Australian Orangutan Project. The Australian Orangutan Project is a non-profit organization and was set up in 1998 by Leif Cocks. AOP is the Australian contribution to international efforts to save the great apes, and is a partner of the United Nations Environmental Programme, Great Ape Survival Project (GRASP).

AOP's mission is to raise awareness and ensure the survival of both the Bornean and Sumatran orangutan in their natural habitat and promote the welfare of all orangutans.

AOP has been working with in-situ conservation organizations

to protect the orangutan in the wild. They provide funds for conservation, protection and education programmes such as –

- Food, salaries, medicines and equipment for rescue centres.
- Anti-logging patrols in National Parks.
- Community based rangers.
- Safe release sites for ex-pets, orphans and injured orangutans.
- Support for conservation research.
- Community education programmes.
- Community based Eco Tours.

Rehabilitation centres in Indonesia and Malaysia are set up to treat and care for sick, injured, or captive orangutans. The ultimate aim is to return the orangutans back to the forest. Many have been returned successfully, however due to lack of available habitat this process is becoming more difficult.



*For more information or to get involved please go to [www.orangutan.org.au](http://www.orangutan.org.au)  
For more information about palm oil, the issues and what you can do to help, such as letter writing, please go to [www.palmoilaction.org.au](http://www.palmoilaction.org.au)*

Half Page Advert Horizontal