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Oils for Energy

Focus on Palm Oil

Conference

India and the Oils Market

Environment

**Sanctuary in Sarawak
RSPO Reaches Milestone**

Nutrition

**Secret Ingredient
Frying Up Healthy Food**

Market Analysis

Moving into Higher Gear

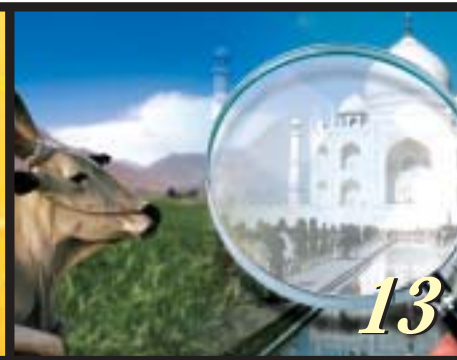
Regional Review

**Overview of the Malaysian
Oil Palm Industry 2005**

Official Event Publication



CONTENTS



Cover Story

Oils for Energy 6

Bio-fuels

Toward Energy Independence 12

High US Soybean Oil Stocks 12

Conference

India and the Oils Market 13

Environment

Sanctuary in Sarawak 16

Moves to preserve the orangutan population and its habitat are in full swing in this Malaysian state, where the primate is totally protected

Sabah to forego RM1 bil revenue to save *orangutan* 20

Orangutan Population in Sabah 21

RSPO Reaches Milestone 21

After a year in the making, criteria for sustainable palm oil production have been adopted

Nutrition

Secret Ingredient 22

Frying Up Healthy Food 24

Sanctuary in Sarawak

Moves to preserve the *orangutan* population and its habitat are in full swing in this Malaysian state, where the primate is totally protected

In the still of the night, the headhunters sneaked up to the longhouse and prepared to attack its occupants. Suddenly, a troop of massive primates came out of the forests, heading for the invaders.

Instead of standing their ground, the warriors fled – mistaking the lumbering creatures for ‘bearded soldiers’ – and the village was saved.

This story has been retold many times by the Iban of Banting, the sworn friends of Sarawak’s *orangutan* (*Pygmaeus pygmaeus*).

But not all of Borneo was sympathetic in the past. The *orangutan* learnt in earlier days that humankind was more often foe than friend.

For example, excited by the discovery of an ‘Ape Man’ species a century ago, anthropologists and scientists had flocked to Borneo to study the primate. Of the estimated population of several thousand *orangutan* at the time, thousands were captured or shot in the name of science.

Photo: Sarawak Forests Department

However, the process of making amends has since begun under a new breed of rescuers and researchers who are focusing their efforts on protecting and preserving the species.

Original habitat

Sarawak's *orangutan* once roamed the forests and foraged in the lowlands. But man began to intrude into their habitat and clear large tracts of primary forest for subsistence cultivation of rice and other crops.

Over the last 100 years, about a quarter of Sarawak's 12 million hectares of forest have been cleared, pushing the *orangutan* to regions with alternative sources of food.

Italian naturalist Odoardo Beccari describes a typical scenario in *Wanderings in the Great Forests of Borneo*: "Usually arboreal, they descend at such times to the ground, and, on reaching the padi fields, collect a big sheaf of rice with heavy ripe ears, and holding it under the arm, get back to their trees, up which they climb, and enjoy their plunder in peace and comfort in their nests.

"They do much injury to the fruit trees and are especially fond of durians, committing great ravages among them even when unripe. The Dyaks were, therefore, much delighted when we killed them..."

Beccari's studies found that, even in the late 1800s, the majority of the *orangutan* in Sarawak inhabited the areas around the Sadong (Ulu Sebuyau) and Batang Lupar (Sri Aman Division) Rivers. These remain their main habitat today. They were also found along the Sarawak River, Bengoh hills (in the Penrissen mountains) and even in Limbang.

Over the last 50 years, logging, agricultural activity and other forms of development have expanded.

However, this did not include oil palm estates, which are a more recent enterprise. Plantations have utilised native land – already cleared for agricultural purposes for several generations – where *orangutan* were no longer found.

Pledge made

The *orangutan* population in the wilds is being given greater attention by state authorities.

In 2002, Wilfred Landong, a descendant of the people of Banting, was appointed general manager of Protected Areas and Biodiversity Conservation in the Sarawak Forestry.

Upon taking up the job, he was appalled to find out that the *orangutan* population in Sarawak had fallen to about 2,000.

"I was three months on the job and on assignment in Batang Ai when I came across the carcass of a female *orangutan* on the river bank. I was shocked.

"It had apparently been shot by poachers. Some said it was killed for its meat and liver, which some individuals believe have aphrodisiacal properties. In my view, they are demented.

"That beautiful animal had managed to get away from its assailant but only managed to crawl to the river bank, where it died."

Wilfred promised himself that he would do everything in his power to protect the *orangutan* and to save its habitat from destruction.



Photo: Sarawak Forestry

Forests at Lanjak Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary
Photo: Sarawak Forests Department



“Fortunately, the incident in Batang Ai was a rare case of illegal hunting. From our investigations, the local people (Iban) revere the *orangutan* and would not have been involved in the killing. We suspect the perpetrators came from elsewhere,” he said.

Conservations and protectives measures

The Sarawak government is doing its part to set aside and conserve forests. One such area is the 30,000 ha Batang Ai National Park and adjoining Lanjak-Entimau Wildlife Reserve (193,000 ha).

This, together with the proposed Ulu Sebuyau National Park of 27,275 ha, will jointly provide the *orangutan* with a total area of almost 250,000 ha in which to forage.

“Sarawak has established a legal framework for wildlife protection with the introduction of the Wildlife and Protection Ordinance. Highly-viable areas for *orangutan* are totally protected,” said Wilfred.

“We are developing a centre of excellence for *orangutan* research at Nanga Delok (Batang Ai) and we’re propagating a holistic approach towards this end. We work closely with global NGOs and scientists and experts to exchange notes.”

He said the Iban from Lanjak-Entimau and Batang Ai are protectors of the *orangutan*, deeming it taboo to capture or kill the animal. With the degree of protection accorded, the Batang Ai population of *orangutan* is on the verge of increase.

Wilfred’s deputy, Dick Cotter, said the Sarawak Forestry is in the process of recording the number of *orangutan* in Ulu Sebuyau.

“We don’t know what to expect. We could find a few *orangutan* or a few dozen. We’ll be happy if there are more. After all they are one of Malaysia’s important mascots,” he said.

Primate expert Sundai anak Silang, an Iban from Simunjan, said locating *orangutan* that roam the vast forests is a continuing quest.

“Protection is a huge challenge because they are highly mobile animals,” said Sundai who pointed out that each animal can forage for food over an area of 5 sq km in a day.

Safe sites

Sarawak Forestry officials also take pride in their two wildlife sanctuaries at Semenggoh and Matang, not far from Kuching.

Semenggoh, with a current population of 32, has been rehabilitating and relocating the primates for many years.



The Nanga Delok ranger station



Ritchie, the main attraction at the Semenggok wildlife centre near Kuching
Photo: Sarawak Forestry

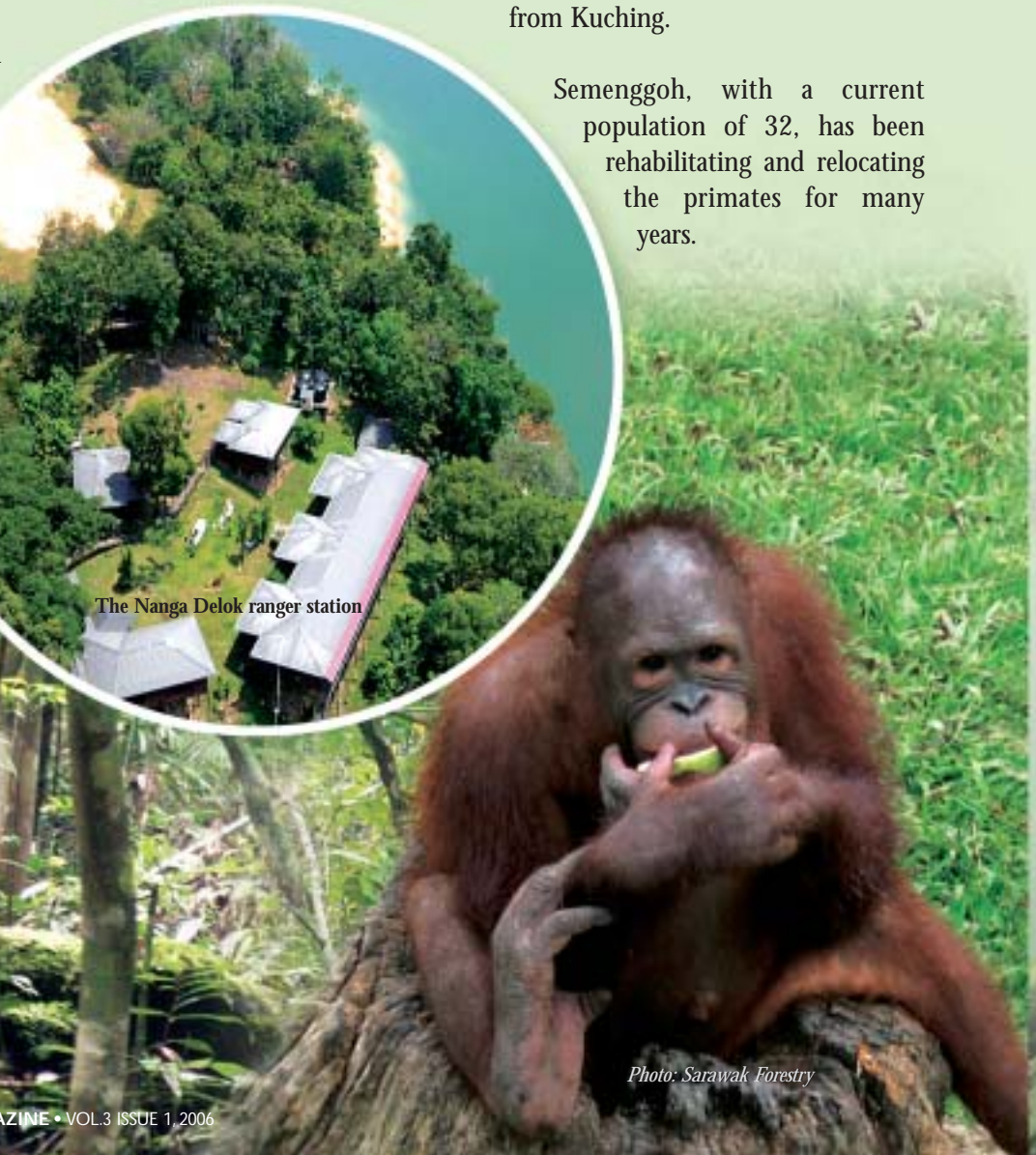


Photo: Sarawak Forestry

The star attraction is Ritchie, now a 90kg male. It was rescued in 1989 as a six-month-old, possibly while on its way to an animal collector. It was found in Batang Ai, squeezed into a cage where it had barely room to move.

The Matang centre now has seven *orangutan* rescued from captivity or found injured. They are being rehabilitated for release into the adjoining Kubah National Park, Sarawak Forestry in partnership with Way Out Experience (WOX), a travel design company with offices in London and Kuala Lumpur is providing a unique experience for volunteers to work with *orangutan* conservation in Matang Wildlife Centre. Projects range from feeding animals and cleaning out cages to enrichment and research programmes. The partnership creates a win-win situation for all those involved and a brighter future for the *orangutan*.

On Dec 27 last year, Sarawak Forestry employees were thrilled to locate a huge male *orangutan* and its pregnant partner in a nest, barely 90m from the Nanga Delok ranger station.

At the time, they were accompanying an Australian assessor, Geoff Vincent, who was on a field trip to the area.

He was conducting a final assessment into a nomination made in 2002 to accord the status of 'Transborder Rainforest Heritage Borneo. (Indonesia/Malaysia)' to the Batang Ai-Lanjak Entimau preserve and Indonesia's Betung Karihun National Park of 800,000 ha.

"It was timely because he was able to see for himself that we are slowly gaining ground in the battle to save these primates, at least in Sarawak," said Wilfred.

"We are keeping our fingers crossed. If (Batang Ai-) Lanjak Entimau and Betung Karihun are recognised as a world heritage site, the *orangutan* will have a place where they will be safe from harm."

James Ritchie



Photo: Wayne Tarman



Geoff Vincent and Sarawak Forestry staff at Nanga Delok
Photo: Sarawak Forestry

