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A future for Borneo's
orangutans

*Wild orangutans
habitats along
Kinabatangan River
are surrounded by
oil palm plantations.*



MEN OF THE FOREST

BORNEO'S ORANGUTAN HABITANTS RESIDE ON WILDLIFE RESERVES THAT ARE ISOLATED BY VAST MONOCULTURE PLANTATIONS. THE BEST WAY TO HELP THESE ANIMALS IS TO PLANT A TREE.

TEXT BY VILLE PALONEN AND YAROSLAVA TROYNICH : PHOTOS BY VILLE PALONEN



Many oil palm plantations stretch to the bank of Kinabatangan River.



Humidity in the jungle is so thick it could be cut with a machete. A crowd on an elevated platform stares at the jungle canopy, their shirts glued to their sweaty backs and cameras ready. Someone swats a mosquito, others whisper to one another.

A sudden crash electrifies everyone. A treetop starts shaking, then another. When a reddish shape flashes through the thick foliage, the group lets out an excited sigh.

One can only marvel at how effortlessly the orangutan moves through the forest. The furry ape doesn't leap from a branch to another like monkeys. The only tree-dwelling ape in the world, she simply sways a tree until she reaches the next one.

The creature's long arms are useful for pranking, too. After a while the curious juvenile appears next to the viewing platform. When tourists get closer, she makes her move and snatches a hat at lightning speed. A British gentleman can only look on from below as the rascal starts fitting his brimmed hat on her head.

ORANGUTAN ORPHANAGE

This baby orangutan, four-year-old Wulan, is being rehabilitated at Rasa Ria Orangutan Centre in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. Getting cheeky with humans is amusing to an onlooker, but it doesn't make the rangers' work easier.

"Orangutans are like small children, only more unpredictable", explains **Melvin George**, a senior ranger. "Sometimes they venture out and we need to fetch them back from a nearby village."

Orangutans live with their mothers until they're seven years old. Wulan and her "tutor," fellow orangutan Katie, wouldn't survive in the wild on their own. Rasa Ria gives them a chance to learn climbing and foraging in a safe environment. The centre is located a 40-minute taxi ride from Sabah's capital Kota Kinabalu.

Rangers provide supplements to the orangutan diet – mainly milk and fruits – twice a day, and small tourist groups can visit feeding sessions. The main purpose for tourism is educational: even locals may have never seen an orangutan. The centre takes only 140 visitors daily, and entrance fees are spent on wildlife conservation.

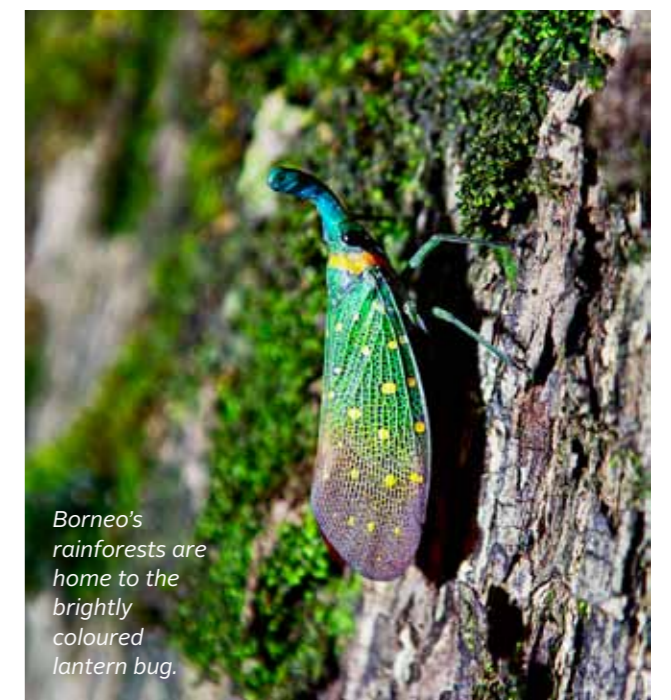
The centre was established in 1996 as a collaboration with Sabah Wildlife Department, Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, and Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort. The small patch of secondary rainforest is located next to a five-star hotel and a golf course. It couldn't support a wild population, but suits an orangutan nursery just fine.

Orphan babies are brought to the centre a couple of times yearly. They have been kept as illegal pets or found



Babies at Rasa Ria Orangutan Centre depend on human care.

ORANGUTANS ARE LIKE SMALL CHILDREN, ONLY MORE UNPREDICTABLE.



Borneo's rainforests are home to the brightly coloured lantern bug.



HUTAN's field assistants spend each day in the same 6-square-kilometre research area.



British volunteer Louisa Roome gets her hands dirty at Ape Malaysia's tree planting site.

VOLUNTEERING

APE MALAYSIA runs 12-day volunteer programmes in Sukau that start on the 21st of every month. You can book a volunteer holiday (or a shorter customised visit) through Stockholm-based Good Travel. Their site is currently only in Swedish, but they're happy to send information in English upon request.

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WWW.APEMALAYSIA.COM
WWW.GOODTRAVEL.SE
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at oil palm plantations after their mothers have been killed. The rescue is carried out by Wildlife Rescue Unit, a 20-strong team funded by Malaysian Palm Oil Council and Rasa Ria Resort.

After a medical check-up and quarantine, apes begin the first stage of their rehabilitation. In a 64-hectare reserve they learn how to climb, find food and build nests. Once they turn six, they are transferred to the much larger Sepilok centre.

The aim of the rehabilitation process is to teach orangutans how to survive in the wild. After they have learned the necessary practical and social skills, which takes years, they are released into Tabin Wildlife Reserve in East Sabah.

"Babies become attached to people, so we try not to spend too much time with them", says George, who was trained at Sepilok and has worked at Rasa Ria for eight years. "But of course we are fond of them, too. Sometimes I visit Sepilok just to see how our babies are doing in their new home."

Orphaned orangutans might be well taken care of, but wild populations struggle. Borneo, world's third-largest island, has lost 80 per cent of its orangutans over the past century. During the last decade only, the decrease has been 30 per cent. Today only 40,000 endangered apes survive in the wild, about quarter of them in Sabah.

Especially habitat loss – logging and clearing rainforest for plantations – has taken its toll. Surviving orangutans are isolated in small protected areas, separated by a vast sea of oil palm plantations.

One of the last refuges for local wildlife is Kinabatangan River. It's home to pygmy elephants, proboscis monkeys, orangutans – and humans who try to save them.

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

"Orangutans can survive in a logged rainforest, too," says conservationist and wildlife warden **Mincho Kahar** and points around a batch of forest on the bank of Kinabatangan River. "In this area, all hardwood was felled more than a decade ago. Thirty orangutans still live here."

The sweltering jungle is a hostile environment for the unaccustomed. Sweat stings the eyes, rubber boots get stuck in knee-deep ponds of mud, and tiny but ferocious mosquitos attack relentlessly.

Borneo's most unnerving beasts, tiger leeches, lay on ambush along the trail, waiting for the opportunity to crawl inside your clothes and bloat themselves with blood. But bug horror stories are nothing but mild nuances: this forest is the best place in Sabah to encounter a wild orangutan.

Kahar is guiding us through the six-square-kilometre research site of HUTAN, a French non-profit organisation which begun primate research in Kinabatangan in 1998. After the turn of the century their work expanded to wildlife conservation and community development

projects, such as creating sustainable prawn traps for local fishermen and teaching environmental issues to school children.

For years, Kahar collected data on orangutans as HUTAN's research assistant. He followed the apes from dawn to dusk, recording their behaviour on a data sheet.

"Field work can get boring, because most of the time orangutans are just feeding or resting. But research assistants – all 15 of them are local guys – are motivated."

For example, researchers learned that even though orangutans can cross smaller oil palm plantations, they get blocked by crocodile-infested rivers. They don't swim, so HUTAN created rope bridges. The first bridge, made of recycled fire hose from Japan, was built in December 2005. Now there are six of them hanging

across the tributaries near the village of Sukau in Lower Kinabatangan.

Kahar says that 20–30 years ago the biggest threat to orangutans in Kinabatangan river was poaching and capturing them for pet trade. Now apes struggle with forest fragmentation. Gigantic oil palm plantations have shattered the rainforest into smaller pieces.

"Monocropping is the biggest threat to orangutans," Kahar says. "Sabah's oil palm plantations are 14,000 square kilometers – that's 20 Singapores."

Environmentalists agree that oil palm is in Borneo to stay, so the most important conservation issue is to unite the remaining forests. When wildlife populations are isolated from each other, a disaster like forest fire or disease outbreak can wipe out an entire population. A few larger plantations fund conservation projects, but Kahar sees it as greenwashing.

"Instead of donating money to organisations just to shut them up, they should give land. If a 100-metre strip of rainforest next to a river bank were left undisturbed, elephants and other animals could travel past the plantations."

WILD ENCOUNTER

An hour's walk into the thicket, Kahar points up to a rambutan tree, where a female and her baby are peeling and eating the fruit. These shaggy-haired creatures are completely different from the cute babies at the orangutan orphanage. They look wild. Kahar warns us not to go under the apes. "They usually go to the toilet before moving to a new 'restaurant' in the next fruit tree," he whispers.

Ape diet consists of leaves, flowers, bark, honey, insects and, most importantly, over 300 kinds of fruit. "Seeds of some fruit trees don't germinate unless they are first digested by an orangutan," explains Kahar.

Orangutans are gardeners of the jungle, and are familiar with at least one thousand plants. Scientists have reported that they eat herbs that kill parasites and are



SEPILOK ORANGUTAN SANCTUARY

SEPILOK, THE WORLD'S FIRST orangutan centre, was set up in 1964. The facility's objective is to rehabilitate orphaned orangutans, whose mothers usually have been slaughtered by poachers during forest clearing or after entering palm oil plantations. Sometimes plantation workers consider orangutans pests, so adults are killed and babies are captured as pets.

The centre, administered by Sabah Wildlife Department, is set on the edge of 43-square-kilometre Kabil-Sepilok Forest Reserve near Sandakan. The sanctuary's wild orangutan population is estimated to be between 100 and 200. In 2012 the rehabilitation programme had 47 apes.

In recent years only a couple of rescued babies were brought to the centre. This isn't necessary good news; it might indicate that there are no more orangutans living anywhere except in isolated wildlife reserves.

Rescued babies stay at the centre for several years and are taught essential skills: climbing, building nests and finding food. Around 700 red apes who have "graduated" the programme have been released into the wild, mostly the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in East Sabah.

Sepilok is the most popular orangutan viewing place in the world. Every day it receives hundreds of visitors whose movements are restricted to wooden walkways. From a viewing platform visitors can observe how rangers give the apes milk, bananas and other fruits. Most of the apes are still learning how to find food in the jungle, so they need supplements for their diet.

Some critics argue that Sepilok pays more attention to tourism than orangutan rehabilitation. Without a question, tourism is a double-edged sword. The presence of hundreds of people doesn't help the orangutans settle in their natural habitat, but without tourist dollars the rehabilitation centre might be left in despair.

Dozens of travel agencies run tours to Sepilok, but visiting independently is easy and much cheaper. The rehabilitation centre is located about a 30-minute drive from Sandakan town, and a one-way taxi fare is ten euros. Entrance ticket is nine euros and camera permit 2.5 euros. The centre is open daily from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. Feeding is twice daily (10:00 am and 3:00 pm) and it is possible to have a lunch at the cafeteria and take short walks along jungle trails.

used by indigenous people as a remedy for malaria or migraine.

Some orangutans use tools for foraging. They learn new skills by watching others, and there are even signs of "cultural traditions." Different populations may use same tools for different purposes, and skills are passed down through the generations. Some tricks – like using large leaves as an umbrella – may have been copied from humans.

HUTAN has a strict policy that visitors – only 300 per year – can spend a maximum of one hour with orangutans. It's an exclusive experience: the majority of tourists in Kinabatangan spot wildlife only from narrow cruise boats.

On the boat ride back to the village, Kahar points at the river banks. The forest has gaping holes, but some clearings are filled with neat rows of shorter trees.

"One of the most important tools for wildlife conservation is forest replanting", says Kahar. HUTAN works with environmental organisations including World Land Trust.

They acquire small pieces of land and hire teams of local women to plant trees and maintain the new mini-forests.

Tourists, too, can roll up their sleeves.

SAVING SAPLINGS

Swinging a rusty two-foot machete is exhausting. It feels like playing tennis in a sauna, but unless the vines and weeds on the clearing are shredded, they suffocate saplings that were planted a few months ago.

Persistent weed seems to re-unite with its roots as soon as one turns his sweaty back. Finally a fragile fruit tree appears under the creeping vines: after a dozen years, an orangutan might built a nest in this tree.

"Weeding multiplies the survival rate of saplings," says **Mark Louis Benedict**, project co-ordinator of Ape Malaysia, a company that has organised volunteer holidays in Kinabatangan since 2008. During a 12-day programme, participants plant trees and become familiar with community projects such as building sustainable prawn traps with local fishermen. They also visit a local elementary school to discuss conservation.

Benedict explains that Ape Malaysia tries to involve as many locals as possible. "We hire boatmen for transportation, and volunteers eat their meals at homestays. It's not the easiest or most profitable way to run a business, but we want to contribute to the community."

Ape Malaysia also buys tree saplings from locals. Benedict says that 30 per cent of the revenue goes to tree planting: saplings, machetes and grass cutters, hir-

ing locals for maintenance work, and so on. The work is part of the Corridor of Life project, which aims to re-unite forest sanctuaries and other protected areas along the Kinabatangan river. Organisations involved include WWF Malaysia and the Sabah Wildlife Department, NGOs like HUTAN and MESCOT, eco-lodges, and even some palm oil companies.

"If forest corridor is not connected, it's almost impossible to see a future for Kinabatangan's wildlife", says Benedict. "But I believe that 15 to 20 years from now we will have a healthy forest."

SWINGING A TWO-FOOT MACHETE IS EXHAUSTING.

RAINFOREST REWARD

Benedict emphasises the importance of volunteers.

"When a forest is good enough for orangutans, it's good for all the other species, too. We're even helping the sea turtles on Selingan Island, because forest buffers on river banks prevent erosion and filter water."

On the way back for lunch in a village homestay, we spot a faded sign on the river bank that warns about



Monocropping or monoculture (the cultivation of only one type of crop) has turned Sabah's forests into ecological deserts.

The orangutan is a key species, like India's Bengal tiger: what is good for orangutans is good for the whole ecosystem.

TOURS AND ACCOMMODATION

SABAH HAS HUNDREDS OF travel agencies who organize almost identical tours. Below are some of the more environmental-conscious (and thus recommended) agencies and lodges.

Red Ape Encounters (RAE) is working in close co-operation with HUTAN in the village of Sukau. RAE can organize a visit to orangutan research site (120 euros) and arrange accommodation with a local family (10–20 euros with meals). You can also book directly with Balai Kito Homestays.

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WWW.REDAPEENCOUNTERS.COM

WWW.HUTAN.ORG.MY

WWW.SUKAUHOMESTAY.COM
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S.I. Tours runs the remote Abai Jungle Lodge along Kinabatangan River, halfway between Sandakan and Sukau. Guests can take short jungle walks and river cruises, and there's a good chance of spotting wild orangutans. An overnight package costs 240 euros.

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WWW.SITOURSBORNEO.COM
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An unforgettable way to experience Borneo's rainforests is to stay at Uncle Tan's Wildlife Adventures camp. 3D2N package costs about 110 euros and includes transportation from Sandakan, river cruises and jungle walks, and meals. The camp is spartan.

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WWW.UNCLETAN.COM
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The fanciest resort around Kota Kinabalu is Rasa Ria Resort, which has an orangutan nursery attached. Non-residents, too, can visit the baby orangutans. Rates for double rooms start at 200 euros per night.

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WWW.SHANGRI-LA.COM/KOTAKINABALU/RASARIARESORT
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IN THE CANOPY, AN ORANGUTAN MOTHER IS FEEDING.

swimming: crocodiles lurk in these waters. A group of proboscis monkeys know the danger and cross the 50-metre-wide tributary via a rope bridge. Pot-bellied males with huge noses go first and adolescent monkeys follow. An extremely rare Storm's stork sits on a branch above the water, and a flock of hornbills, their majestic beaks silhouetting against the sky, glide across the river.

We speed up as we reach the main river, but after zooming by an oil palm plantation our boatman slows down and steers the boat towards a majestic assam-assam tree.

In the canopy, an orangutan mother is feeding. A tiny baby, not more than a couple of months old, clings onto her fur. He stares at us, eyes round with amazement. On nearby branch a third orangutan, a juvenile, watches our boat. The rare opportunity to see these wild and free apes is a volunteer's reward.

Making of this reportage was partly sponsored by the Ministry of Environment, Finland. ●

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FINNAIR FLIES to Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong daily. From there you can continue to Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan with **oneworld** partners. Sandakan has a daily minibus connection to Sukau village.
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