

Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program



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Issue: 37

Code RED

An e-newsletter from your friends in West Kalimantan

Dear Friends and Supporters,

Welcome to our first Code RED issue of 2016. This year promises to be another exciting and productive year of protecting Gunung Palung's orangutan population! Raising community awareness about conservation issues is one of our key strategies in this fight, and this month we'd like to share an article published by GPOCP's staff journalist, Pit, to get people thinking about the importance of orangutans. Pit routinely writes articles for local and provincial newspapers and websites, and this one has proven quite popular on our Indonesian social media pages.

The second article highlights our newest staff capacity-building initiative, which is to give each of our conservation staff the

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experience of being an orangutan researcher for a week. We began this activity in December 2015 with GPOCP Environmental Education Manager, Mariamah Achamad. She had a great time and learned a lot about orangutans and other primates, some of which has already been incorporated into our education work. Read her account of her experience below for the full story.

As you read this, the conservation and research teams are meeting at our Bentangor Environmental Education Center to compile and review last year's accomplishments. For a sneak peak of one of our key milestones from 2015, check-out the sidebar. It was a great year!

Sincerely,



Cheryl Knott, Executive Director

[Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program \(GPOCP\)](#)

What Do You Call an Orangutan in Indonesian?

By Petrus Kanisius, GPOCP Environmental Education Field Officer

No, it's not the beginning of a joke! In Bahasa Indonesia, the word "ekor", meaning tail, is used to describe the number of animals in a group. At our conservation activities, though, GPOCP staff use the word "individu" (individual) when they talk about orangutans. Although it's a small difference in terminology, we feel that this difference is a useful entry point to teaching people about orangutans and great apes in general. With this in mind, last week GPOCP's staff journalist, Pit, published the following article in the local Indonesian media. We have added a couple of sentences on the end to tie this in to a larger discussion surrounding great apes. While the philosophical conversation about great ape "personhood" is outside the scope of our environmental education and conservation awareness work in Indonesia, [Pit's article](#) promoting the explicit use of individual for orangutans in Bahasa Indonesia (translated below) certainly hints at this issue.

2016 BOCS Selection Begins

GPOCP, in partnership with the Orang Utan Republik Foundation and Orangutan Outreach, will be awarding six scholarships to conservation-minded students from Ketapang and Kayong Utara regencies in West Kalimantan this year, under the Bornean Orangutan Caring Scholarship Program. We currently have 13 scholarship recipients, including two that will graduate this year. The goal of the program is to build capacity for orangutan and rainforest conservation among promising young environmental leaders in Kalimantan. We look forward to announcing the winners in March.

A New Record for
our Environmental
Education
Program!



Some people believe that terminology is not important, but in conservation, the words we use often convey our values. Photo © Tim Laman.

Often I hear people refer to orangutans with the word *ekor*. For example, they say "We saw one *ekor* orangutan near the village yesterday." Grammatically this is correct for animals. But, is there a better word to use for orangutans?

Before we talk about that issue, let's learn more about this primate. Orangutans are rare animals, only found in Borneo and Sumatra. There are many things about orangutans that are interesting and unique. One of the most amazing things about orangutans is that they are what conservationists call an "umbrella species," meaning their extinction will signify the loss of hundreds of other plant and animal species in the rainforest. Or, more positively, by protecting orangutans we can conserve all of these forest species, from the smallest insect to the largest bird and other primates.

Orangutans hold an important role in the ecosystem as seed dispersers, speeding forest regeneration through the fruits and seeds they eat. The existence of primary rainforest, their preferred habitat, not only supports communities that depend on it for ecosystem services, but is also the key to a healthy planet. And, rainforests need biodiversity. Saving orangutans also helps all of the other mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and plants that live in Indonesian rainforests.



2015 was a great year for the entire GPOCP conservation team, with many milestones to celebrate. We'd like to specially recognize our Environmental Education team, who brought our message of orangutan and rainforest conservation to 7,900 students and young people through in-class lectures, puppet shows, field trips, and volunteer activities. This is an 80% increase from 2014, when the team reached 4,400 youth. Thanks to our dedicated team for their hard work!



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Orangutans play a critically important role in Indonesia's rainforest ecosystems, shaping the habitat of thousands of other species.

Photo © Tim Laman.

Now, let's come back to the discussion about what word is best to describe orangutans. The conservation world has already agreed that orangutans are individuals (as opposed to *ekor*). One reason for this is that orangutans are solitary, living alone instead of in groups. Another explanation is that orangutans really don't have tails! Bornean orangutans are one of the world's five species of great ape, with the others being Sumatran orangutans, gorillas, chimpanzees, and bonobos. Gibbons, which also don't have tails, are classified as lesser apes. Primates with tails are called monkeys. Those that most of us are familiar with include red langurs, macaques, and proboscis monkeys. For these reasons, the term *ekor* is misleading, and we at GPOCP always refer to orangutans as individuals.



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"What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make."

-Jane Goodall-

Orangutans and humans share 96.4% of our DNA. How can we afford not to save them from extinction?

Photo © Tim Laman.

The "ekor or individual" question gets at a bigger question surrounding great apes: how human are they? Or, in what ways are we alike? We know that orangutans share 96.4% of our DNA, and that humans and chimpanzees are 98.8% alike. Great apes have their own cultures, can learn sign language, and have been observed using tools in the wild. So, where is the line between human and ape? We don't have all the answers, but we agree with Pit: clearly orangutans and other great apes should be described as more than just an "ekor".

Following the Orangutan Followers

By Mariamah Achmad, GPOCP Environmental Education Manager

December was the first month of a new capacity-building initiative for GPOCP. Each staff on the conservation team will now have the opportunity to spend one week at Cabang Panti Research Station, so that we can learn more about orangutans, the forest, and the research project. This will help us become more effective conservationists, and the occasional week spent in the rainforest also keeps work fresh and renews our motivation. So, from December 9-15th, I was able to visit Cabang Panti and become a researcher for a week! Because I have never followed orangutans before, I spent most of my time observing the research assistants to learn the techniques. I was also very interested in what the orangutans were eating, and collecting food samples became one of my main projects.



Mayi's first trip to Cabang Panti was a great success! This program will provide excellent capacity building and field experience for our conservation staff.

Day 1: Thursday, Dec. 10

Research Manager, Kat Scott, and I searched for orangutans close to camp. We found Jumi, an adult female, eating from a *Santiria* tree. There were also two hornbills feeding in the same tree. We decided to search for other orangutans so that I could learn the trail system, but unfortunately didn't find any more - only two macaques, two red langurs, and three orangutan nests. Eventually, we called it a day, because the previous night it had poured down rain and camp had flooded, so we needed some rest! I was impressed by how sensitive Kat was to all of the movements and sounds in the forest and how she knew exactly where the animals were. She explained that if I could spend an entire month at camp, I would get much better at understanding not just if there are animals around, but also how to discern between the species. The sounds of orangutans in the forest, for example, are much louder and localized than the sounds that gibbons make, which sound more like quick splashes in the trees.

Day 2: Friday, Dec. 11

I went into the forest with Toto and Akau, two of the orangutan research assistants. Our objective was to search for orangutans, and then if we found one, follow until he or she made a night nest. Because it had rained all night and into the morning, we left from camp at about 11:20 am, which was unusually late. Luckily, at about 12:05 pm we discovered an unidentified juvenile orangutan! She was eating *Chaetocarpus* fruits, which are covered in itchy hairs. Her feeding behavior was very interesting; she would rub the fruits on the back of

her hand to get rid of the irritants before eating. After about an hour she moved on to a durian tree. After visiting several more trees in search of fruit, she decided to make a nest at about 6:00 pm. It was already dark, and the river, which had been easy to cross in the afternoon light, was now full with runoff from the previous morning's storm and moving quickly. With Akau's help, I was finally able to get across, and after about an hour's walk we arrived back at camp. When I got back, I sorted all of my samples and photos, so that I could identify the trees again later if I saw them in the forest. In just the six hours that we followed her, the orangutan had eaten nine different species!



Some of Mayi's fruit samples. Check out the small hairs on the *Chaetocarpus* fruit! Clockwise, from top left: *Chaetocarpus* sp., *Diospyros* sp., *Willughbeia* sp. *Strichnos* sp., *Ficus* sp., *Scapium* sp.

Day 3: Saturday, Dec. 12

Although I wanted to have the experience of following an orangutan from the morning nest, I decided that I wasn't quite capable of waking up at 3:00 am and spending the entire day in the forest. I'm not a professional yet! So, I went out with Botanical Assistant, Agus, after lunch. Toto and Akau had been in the jungle since 4:00, and had already scarfed down their lunchboxes by the time we arrived. Toto explained that, while he likes doing orangutan research, it can be incredibly tiring. If the orangutan makes a night nest far from camp, the researchers have to leave as early as 2:00 in the morning to be there before the animal wakes up. The long days and short nights can be difficult to handle. Because Agus and I had already arrived, Akau went back to camp because he was feeling sick, and it wasn't long before Kat arrived to help out.

The orangutan that we followed that day, the same juvenile female from the day before, moved quickly and switched feeding trees many times. She took us up and down the mountain, and there were several times when we had to run to keep up with her. Because of that, we gave her the nickname "Ghost." She ate from seven different trees over the next couple of hours, until we lost her because it started raining hard. Although orangutans are large animals, and can be very loud in the trees, they can also move super quietly when they see an opportunity to escape. I was bummed that we lost her, because we already had almost a full day of data. We searched for another hour, but didn't find her, and were forced to go back to camp disappointed. Our day was truly full of highs and lows, in more ways than one.



Research assistants Yadi and Toto on a full-day orangutan follow. Photo © Robert Rodriguez Suro.

Day 4: Sunday, December 13

Today I decided to help Katie, who planned to climb trees to collect extra fruit and *Pandanus* epiphyte samples for Boston University graduate student Andrea DiGiorgio's data. We left camp at about 9:00 am. When we got to the first tree, we discovered that an orangutan had very recently eaten there, and after we collected all of the half-eaten fruit under the tree, Katie decided that we didn't need any more. The tree which hosted the *Pandanus* plant was a different story, though! Katie examined the tree and taught me the basics of climbing, and then we walked back to camp for lunch. The trail back to camp was pretty far, and I thought it wasn't worth it to go back just to eat, but Katie needed to collect more equipment to climb that afternoon. We returned together at about 2:00 pm, and it took another hour to collect enough *pandan* leaves to complete the sample. Unfortunately, I couldn't try my hand at climbing, because it had started raining, but I was able to help by making sure everything was safe on the ground, and took photos to document her work.

Day 5: Monday, December 14

On my last day at camp, I took a break from the orangutans to follow the red langur and gibbon project research assistants, who also work

at Cabang Panti, on one of their monthly phenology routes. Zakaria, Surya, and I left camp at about 7:00 am. We split into two teams, and Zakaria and I climbed the mountain for about two hours to reach our assigned trail. The goal of the phenology project is to better understand the patterns of forest productivity, and data collection involves counting the number of new leaves, flowers, and fruits within the phenology tree plots. This information is useful not just for learning about rainforest ecology, but also to guide the teams when they search for primates. Knowing which trees are currently fruiting makes it much easier to seek out the orangutans, gibbons, and red langurs in the forest. I tried to help take data, but it was so challenging to discern between old leaves, new leaves, flowers, and fruit through the binoculars! Zakaria told me that it takes a few months of practice, and lots of patience, to learn how to collect the phenology data. It took us about three hours to finish taking data, and then we returned to camp for the day.



Mayi will use the knowledge she gained at Cabang Panti to enrich our Environmental Education program.

Overall, I really enjoyed my time at Cabang Panti. Although the research and conservation teams are all part of the same organization, we don't often get a chance to spend time together, and this experience was very beneficial for all of us! I now feel more motivated in my work, and will integrate everything I learned about orangutan behavior into my environmental education presentations and field trips. Hopefully next year I will get to visit the research station again, see more orangutans, and learn even more about the rainforest of Gunung Palung.



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