



# Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program



June 2014

Issue: 18

## Code RED

An e-newsletter from your friends in Borneo

Dear Friends and Supporters,

Welcome to another edition of our Code RED newsletter. We begin with a detailed look at our Sustainable Livelihoods Program and a recent video production that was made about our growing Non-Timber Forest Products initiative. This group comprises 93 community members who use sustainably grown and collected plant material to weave baskets, bracelets, and other handmade products, which are sold throughout Borneo and some other locations in Indonesia. Then, Project Volunteer Research Assistant, Robert Rodriguez Suro, transports you to the world of the Cabang Panti Research Station. Read his dramatic account of a fight between wild male orangutans that, incredibly, took place in the river!

This newsletter comes to you as I am arriving in Borneo for my summer field season with my family. Follow our blogs on National Geographic's "[Postcards From the Forest](#)". We are also thrilled to

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**Help us Protect Orangutans!**

**Postcards From The**

welcome our new Program Director, Cathryn Freund. As always, I am proud to bring you the stories of our community and our staff.

Thank you so very much to everyone for your continued support of our work. Happy reading!

Sincerely,



Cheryl Knott, Executive Director  
[Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program \(GPOCP\)](#)

## Conserving Forests by Weaving Handicrafts

By Wendy Tamariska and Yan Embik, Sustainable Livelihoods Coordinator and Finance and Operations Director

In the world of orangutan conservation and environmental NGOs, GPOCP stands out for our emphasis on working locally and supporting villages when campaigning against the destruction of the forests. In a video featured on Ruai TV in May of 2014, villagers from Sejahtera Village discussed the environmental impact of rice farming and how creating artisanal handicrafts contributes to the protection of the forest. With the support of our funders, GPOCP is creating a non-timber forest product community that will be more self-sufficient in building networks with other markets.

Farming in the mountains around Sejahtera was a common occupation in the past, but in 2012 farmers began moving down from the mountains to low-laying areas to farm rice or seek other jobs. In the past, locals could easily enter the forest, where they made a living taking and using valuable raw materials, some of which they used to produce household items. Since Gunung Palung is a Protected Area, villagers are no longer permitted to log or use the natural resources from the forest. One of our main accomplishments has been to teach people how they can grow these Non-Timber Forest Products in their own backyards and thus no longer need to encroach on the National Park. In the video, Ibu Dare describes how she found an alternative to using resources from protected areas, "We used to take raw materials from the forest, but now we are not permitted. So we plant [within the village]. We can plant Pandan and bamboo." These pandan and bamboo plants are then used to make some of the most popular selling items, such as floor mats and baskets.

## Forest

Follow National Geographic's "[Postcards From the Forest](#)" during July, as Executive Director, Dr. Cheryl Knott, her husband, National Geographic Photographer, Tim Laman, and their children, Russell and Jessica, report on their adventures following wild orangutans in Borneo this summer.

## Welcome Cassie

We at GPOCP would like to extend a heartfelt welcome to our new Program Director, Cathryn, "Cassie", Freund. Originally from Minnesota, Cassie has had three years of experience working on conservation issues in Kalimantan, Indonesia with the Orang-utan Tropical Peatland Project. She is ecstatic to be joining our team in Ketapang, looking forward especially to getting to know the staff and conservation projects that make GPOCP a unique place to work. We want you to know, Cassie, that we are looking forward to working with you too!

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*Non-Timber Forest Products group members gather to work on Pandanus mats.*

GPOCP is assisting many of these villagers in making a living producing handicrafts and thus eliminating their need to turn to illegal logging to produce a cash income. Lekar, the tradition of weaving products from the Nipa Palm (*Nypa fruticans*) is a trade that Darwani, one of Gunung Palung's many artisans, has been practicing since childhood. He sells his handicrafts within his home or to interested buyers outside his village. In the video, Darwani explains that by creating lekar products, he's directly helping to save the forest, "Water sources can disappear if we keep cutting the forest. We used to make rice fields by [slashing and burning] trees, which finally led to barren fields. In the end, I preferred an easier job, which I had practiced since my childhood."

The closing remarks of the video end with GPOCP's Alternative Livelihoods Coordinator, Wendy Tamariska, commenting on the support the artisans need: "Traditional crafting is part of the culture here and it has market prospects. It is fruitful enough to practice the art as an alternative livelihood. In Kayong Utara Regency, we built a market network with [the council of National Regency Crafts]." The success of our Alternative Livelihoods Program is attributed to tailoring the strategies to the local culture and population. Finding alternative solutions to the growing human dependency on forest resources requires us to ensure that villagers can create for themselves a sustainable living that meets the income needs of their families.

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*"Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who does nothing because he could only do a little."*

~Edmund Burke~





*An array of finished basket products on a hand-woven mat.*

We are proud that so many people are taking part in the production of our Non-Timber Forest Products. Now, 93 villagers are making and selling these crafts and their markets stretch all the way to the busy airport in Jakarta. It is heartening to see local people joining together to create prosperity for their villages in meaningful and sustainable ways.

## A Day To Remember

By Robert Rodriguez Suro, Volunteer Research Assistant

Following orangutans in the rainforest, romantic as it may seem from the stories and photos of the great primatologists of the past, is not always the adrenaline-filled ride of excitement and adventure that movies and magazines sell to you. There is often a lot of sitting around and waiting; orangutans may eat for hours at the same tree, doing nothing else besides stuffing themselves with fruit. More uneventful still, they may occasionally make nests during the middle of the day and nap for hours. At times like these there is nothing to do but sit. And wait. And hope that they eventually decide to move on to more interesting things. Sometimes we researchers get lucky. Many times we do not. When it comes down to it though, primatologists aren't looking for excitement. They are looking for truth, and the truth is that orangutans spend a lot of their time being solitary, just eating or resting high up in the trees. Because of the occasional excitement, however, it is only fair that we have to sit through all of the ordinary bits.

During my time living in the rainforest, I have found one exception to this rule: Codet. If there were an orangutan equivalent to "The Most Interesting Man in the World," Codet would be it. With Codet, there is never any sitting around, and it seems like every follow you go on with him turns into an epic adventure.



*King of the Forest, Codet, uses a fallen log to cross a river.  
Photo by: Robert Rodriguez Suro*

Codet was the first orangutan I ever followed, and out of all the orangutans at Gunung Palung, I know him the best. He has had a long history of follows at Cabang Panti, and we've observed him becoming very habituated around humans, a fact that has grown to be even more true during the time I've been here. Unlike most orangutans, which tend to stay higher up in the trees and at a greater distance from humans, Codet is no shy ape. When I follow him, he comes down to the ground, just a few feet away, with no qualms whatsoever. Back during my first few times following him he only came to the ground when he apparently wanted to travel more quickly to lose us. Nowadays though, he comes to the ground habitually, seemingly just as an alternative to traveling around up in the trees, and barely pays us followers any mind. Every now and then, though, he looks back at me and I look into his eyes and see wheels turning in his head, as if he were thinking, "I know you're there. I haven't forgotten about you."

One of my favorite memories of Codet started off as just another regular search day. I had been contacted by Caitlin, another researcher at Cabang Panti. That day we got to witness the wildest things I've ever seen orangutans do first-hand. Walimah, a lone adolescent female, showed up in the midst of our follow, and joined in with Codet. It wasn't her first time travelling with him. She always seems to be on the prowl for him, but ends up being mostly ignored. On this particular day, though, she and Codet had something special in store for us. She approached Codet, slowly at first. Codet was as still as a statue, but eventually allowed her advances. "Are they going to mate?" was the question on our minds, and Codet and Walimah did not disappoint. Mating is something that is very rarely observed by orangutan researchers, but that day we got to witness it. Little did we know that the day was far from over, and we had no clue what was still in store. After mating, Codet and Walimah spent the whole day traveling in consortship with each other.

We could never have predicted what happened later that afternoon. After crossing the river and huddling up in a tree for some rest, Codet began to long call. He appeared to have been provoked by something, as he looked intently and vigilantly in a single direction as his call resonated in the air. Abruptly, he jumped down to the ground and ran off in a fit of aggression, as if to lay waste to some unknown threat in the distance. Then we heard some strange grunts and the breaking of branches from the direction Codet took off in. Almost immediately, we knew there was something intense

happening. We split up, and tried to track down the source of the noises.

I was frantically chasing the phantom sounds in the distance and weaving my way through thick vines and branches in an attempt to not lose their position. Breathing heavily, I managed to catch up to Codet, and finally saw what was happening: Codet was in a standoff with an unflanged male, on the ground. We kept our distance, but followed them from afar as Codet made his opponent retreat downhill towards the river. Fearfully but steadily, this unflanged male walked backwards as Codet advanced forward. They were head to head on the ground, moving their way backwards as the unflanged male conceded the ground in front of him in fear as Codet advanced on his position. They disappeared behind a thicket near the river bank, not far from the water. I couldn't see where they were, but I kept walking forward, hoping to catch a window into what they were doing. I was nervous about running into them suddenly, as it wouldn't be the brightest idea in the world to come between two aggressive male orangutans about to fight.

Caitlin and I managed to find a way to circle around them by crossing the river above their position. We were able to hop our way, rock to rock, towards the center of the river, and climb above a big boulder that stuck out in the middle. We were at the edge of a waterfall that emptied into a large pool below, and standing atop the boulder we had a bird's eye view. As we stood there, we saw Codet and this unflanged male make their way into clear view as they approached the water's edge, near the base of the waterfall. The unflanged male was still retreating, his back turned to the water as Codet took each step towards him. The unflanged male, with no exit route available to go back into the trees, was forced waist-deep into the water. Codet had him cornered, and there were only two ways out: fight, or swim.



*Codet swings through the forest.  
Video by: Robert Rodriguez Suro*

A fight with Codet was no option for the other male however, as Codet towered over him in size and far outweighed him in sheer mass. With nowhere else to go, the unflanged male entered further into the water, and managed to climb atop a small rock that stuck out in the middle of the river. Codet hesitated to follow, as swimming is not an activity orangutans voluntarily participate in. The unflanged male was searching for options. He could continue swimming to the other side of the river, or try to escape by climbing onto an overhanging branch that he could just barely reach by



standing up high on his rock. He tried the latter. Codet however, anticipating this, grabbed the branch by other end and blocked the unflanged male's escape. With every escape attempt, Codet had the upper hand, and all seemed to be lost for the unflanged male when Codet finally worked up the courage to enter the water in pursuit. Codet lunged himself into the river and quickly climbed onto the rock occupied by the unflanged male. It quickly turned into a King of the Hill battle as Codet and the other male began to exchange blows. Codet hit the male multiple times across the face with wide open-handed swings, while the other male tried to block and counter with his own attacks. It was clear that the unflanged male was no match, and he was quickly knocked back down into the water after receiving a few quick jabs to the eyes from Codet. Wet and fearful for his life, the unflanged male frantically swam back to the riverbank with Codet on his tail. Reaching land once again, the male managed to climb up a tree which stretched a branch across to the other side of the river. Codet almost caught up to him, but it was too late; the male had already made it to the other side by the time Codet climbed up on the branch.

Caitlin and I were still standing there on top of the boulder above where the fight had taken place, still in shock in the wake of the crazy event we had just witnessed. We couldn't wait to get back to camp, and share our unbelievable stories from the day. Codet is always an adventure to follow, but on this particular day, we were absolutely blown away. I've seen many awesome things while living here at Gunung Palung, but out of everything, I can be sure that Codet will be the one orangutan I will always remember, and this event will be one that I never forget.

Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program  
(GPOCP)



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