



Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program



December 2014

Issue

Code RED

An e-newsletter from your friends in Borneo

Dear Friends and Supporters,

Welcome to the latest edition of our Code RED newsletter. Below, our articles feature two very different but important subjects - our Wildlife Crime Monitoring and Investigation Team and the importance of the well-known and abundant *Ficus* genus.

We are proud to share with you the recent success of our orangutan rescues. In the past few months we have helped identify and rescue 4 illegally held pet orangutans and 5 trapped in land being cleared for oil palm. Knowing that we are bringing real change to these orangutans' lives is extremely gratifying.

But of course, in our overall mission of conservation, orangutans are not the only species we help. The forests themselves are the main target of many of our conservation programs and in our second article, we put the spotlight on the plants. The *Ficus* genus is particularly important to orangutans, and we invite you to learn more about it here.

Our sidebar also has some breaking news about the recent signing of a research collaboration agreement with Universitas Tanjungpura (UNTAN), which will help strengthen our bond with the Indonesian academic community.

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Finally, as 2014 draws to a close we encourage you to consider making an end of the year donation to GPOCP. Every bit helps in our efforts to safeguard and study these amazing animals.

We hope that you enjoy the articles below, and as always, we thank you for reading and for your continued support of our work.

Sincerely,

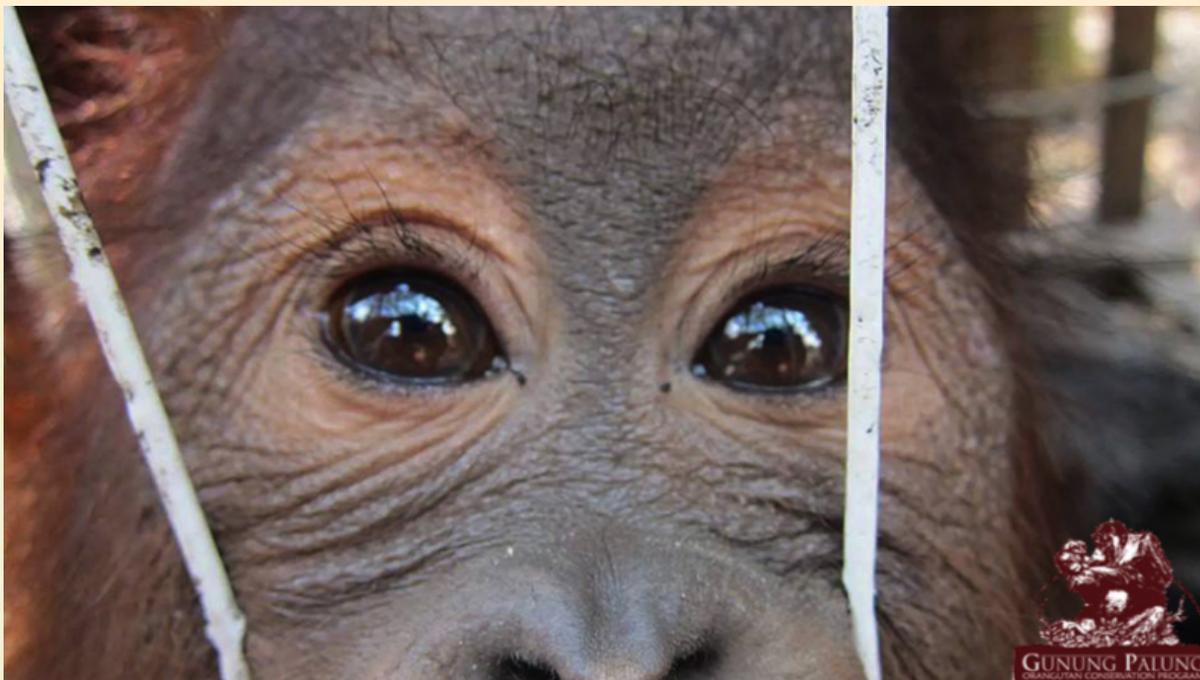
Cheryl Knott, Executive Director
[Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program \(GPOCP\)](#)

Operation Orangutan Rescue

By Cassie Freund

A solitary man rides his motorbike for hours across West Borneo's rugged, dusty roads to the far reaches of Ketapang district, stopping in a remote village where the once lush and varied rainforest has been cut down to make room for repetitive monoculture oil palms. "Is this the place?" he thinks to himself, then checks his text messages for the information. Sure enough, he has arrived in exactly the right spot. He approaches the nearest house, peering around the back where there appears to be a large cage. A small juvenile orangutan is tied up inside, and he quickly snaps a photo with his cell phone. Suddenly a voice calls out from inside the house: "Enam ratus ribu!" This is a small sum to pay, only about \$50 U.S., for such an endangered species.

The man feigns interest and starts a conversation. "Where did you get him? How long has he been here? What do you feed him?" he asks, taking mental notes of the responses and his own observations of the orangutan in the cage. If he feels safe, he takes a few more photos, and promises to come back next week to talk about his potential purchase again. It is not him, however, who returns - instead a team of Indonesian government authorities and veterinarians from International Animal Rescue (IAR) arrive at the house to confiscate the orangutan and bring him to IAR's nearby rehabilitation center.



One of the orangutans that was rescued this past October.
This photo was taken during the course of GPOCP's undercover investigation.

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The story above is fictional, but it illustrates the work of GPOCP's Wildlife Crime Monitoring and Investigation team. The work is challenging, and because poaching orangutans is illegal under Indonesian law, they must work alone and undercover in order to gather accurate information. Although the team itself is small, just two investigators, they each have a wide network of informants throughout the Ketapang and Kayong Utara districts and thus our reach is actually quite wide. The investigators are responsible for searching out new cases and following leads on orangutans that have been or are in danger of being poached. Each investigator spends 2-3 weeks in the field each month collecting information and photographic evidence, then he writes up an official report on each case. GPOCP distributes these reports to the local conservation authorities (Balai Konservasi Sumber Daya Alam), the Ketapang Police Department, and IAR, who go to the field and rescue or confiscate the orangutans as necessary. GPOCP's investigations have directly contributed to nine orangutan rescues over the past four months alone: four individuals who were being illegally held as pets and five who were stranded in land that had already been cleared and burned to make way for oil palm.

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The investigators often come across other examples of wildlife crime while in the field. Here are three hornbill beaks that were being sold as decorations. Hornbills, sacred animals to the local Dayak people, are also subject to significant poaching across all of Borneo.

This program and our investigative staff play a critical role in GPOCP's overall mission to conserve and protect orangutans in Ketapang and Kayong Utara. Although the work can be emotionally taxing, every rescue is a small victory for conservation. Things don't always go perfectly as planned, but over the past several months I have observed some truly amazing teamwork among local authorities, GPOCP, and IAR staff. Teamwork like this is ultimately what will be needed if we are to succeed in our joint mission to conserve the orangutans, their forest habitat and the other biodiversity that lives in the Gunung Palung area. Thanks to our local partners for another year of great work, and thank you also to everyone who supports us, be it financially, by telling your friends about our work, or by liking and sharing our posts on Facebook. Every bit helps, and we are looking forward to even greater successes in 2015!

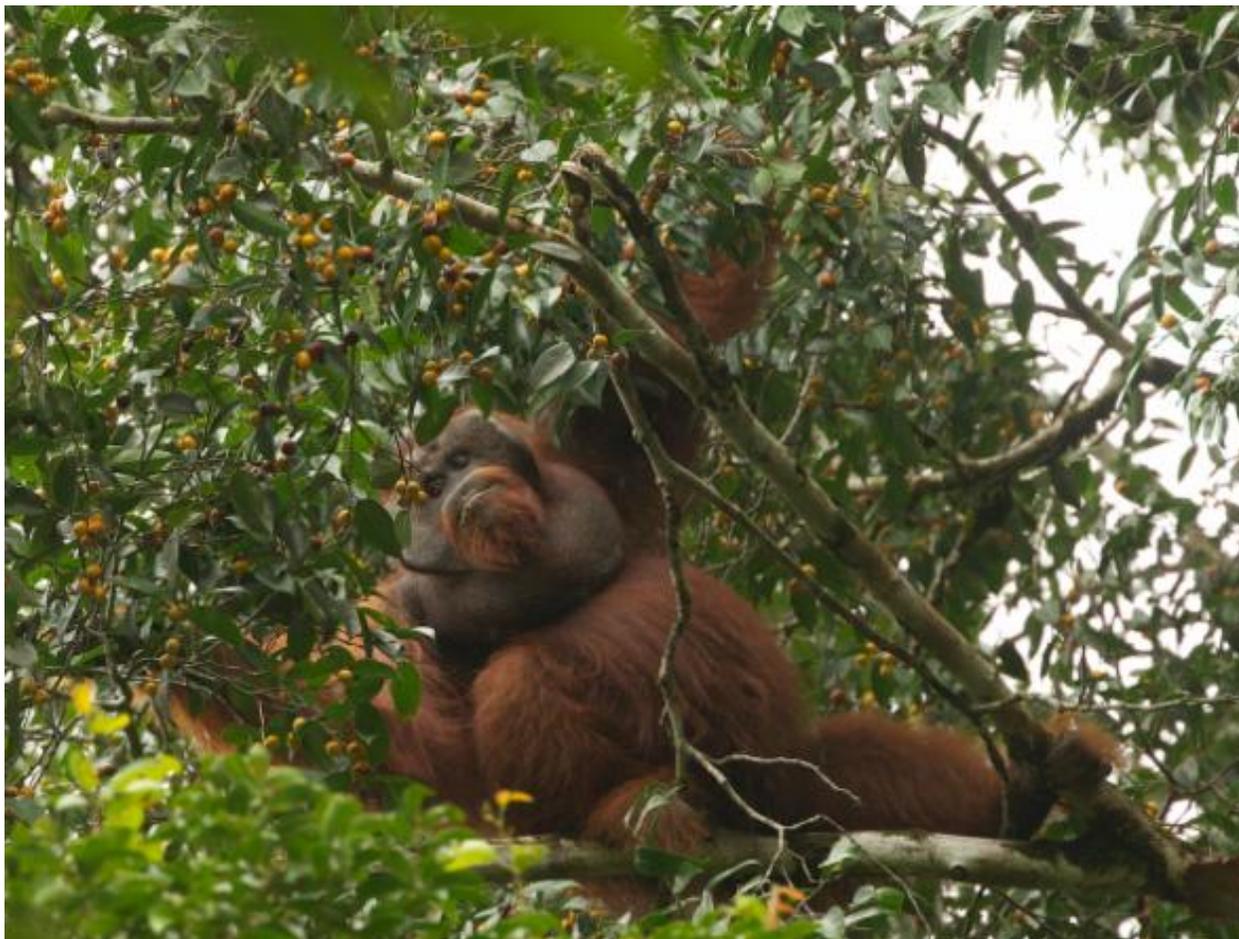


An oil palm plantation in the foreground with the forested hills of Gunung Tarak, adjacent to Gunung Palung, in the background. As large-scale agriculture expands, orangutans and other forest biodiversity are pushed into human-dominated landscapes, making them more vulnerable to being poached.

The Many Faces of *Ficus*

By Cheryl Knott, Edward Tang and Rachel Bennett

In order to survive, orangutans must be part of a healthy ecosystem where the plant foods they rely on are flourishing. There are nearly 30,000 species of vascular plants in the country of Indonesia, with over 1000 species in the Moraceae family alone. In this family, a staggering half of them are of the genus, *Ficus*, known in the local language as *beringin*, and in English as figs. Figs are actually the most commonly eaten food by orangutans at Gunung Palung, making up almost 10% of their diet. Orangutans feed on figs almost twice as often as the next most common genus. This is not because they are particularly favored, but because of their unusual fruiting pattern.

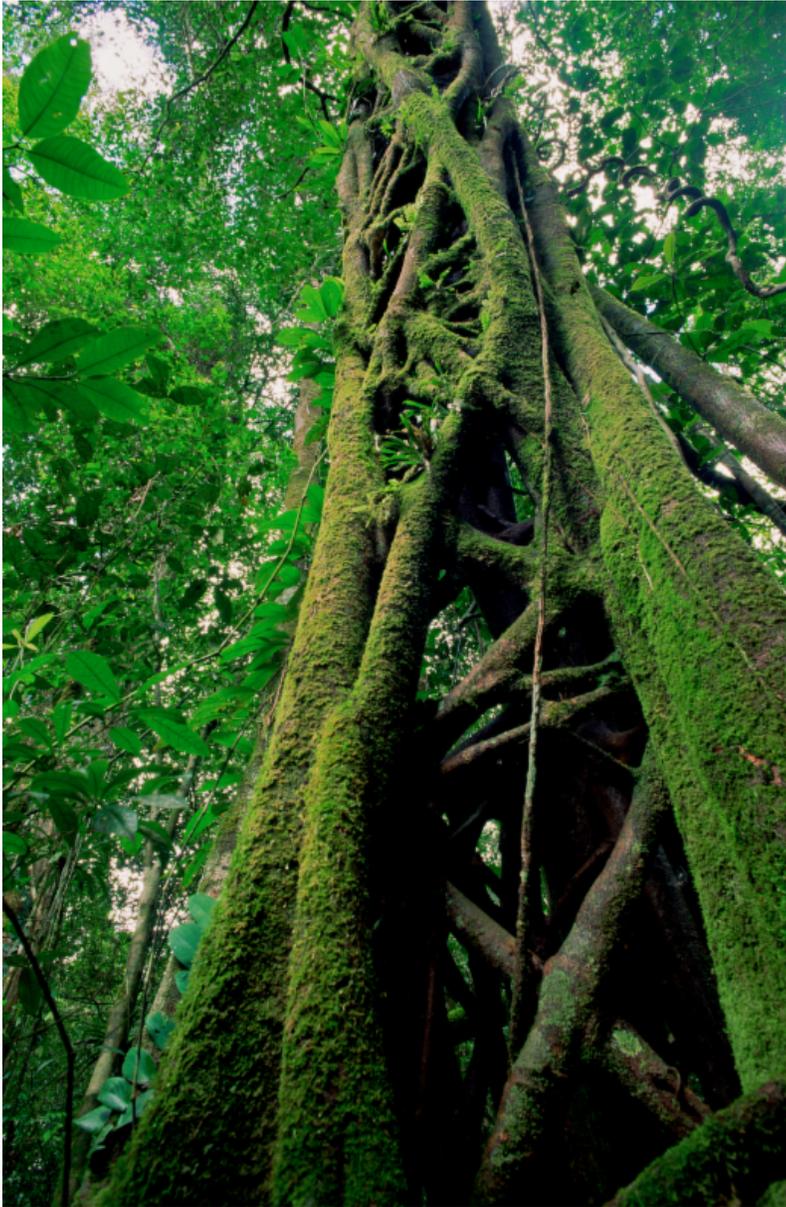


A flanged male orangutan eats Ficus fruit in Gunung Palung National Park. © Tim Laman

All figs are pollinated by tiny female fig wasps which burrow into unripe figs and lay their eggs in some of the undeveloped seeds. The fig larvae then mature along with the fig. The wingless males emerge first, mate with the females, and then dig out tiny tunnels to the surface, through which the females will escape, bringing some pollen with them. Within days the female wasp must find a new individual of the same figs species that has just produced unripe figs. She will then burrow into the end of it, spreading the pollen from the other tree, and beginning the cycle again. Thus, as opposed to most other trees in the forest, there is not a fruiting season, but rather the flowering and fruiting of figs is staggered so as to always have some new immature figs available for pollination and to keep the pollinators alive.

Otherwise, the species would go extinct in that forest. The orangutans and many other rainforest animals, including gibbons, red leaf monkeys and macaques, benefit from this staggered fruiting as there are always at least some figs available when few other trees are fruiting. This makes figs a keystone species, take them away and you might find the collapse of the ecosystem.

At Gunung Palung orangutans have 56 figs to choose from, and in fact they feed on most of these, from the very tiny *Ficus binnendykii* to the huge *Ficus punctata*. Most figs are hemiephytes, meaning that they start their life as an epiphyte, growing on top of another rainforest tree, but eventually establish terrestrial contact through sending a root down to the ground. Many of the figs of Gunung Palung are what are known as strangler figs - eventually enveloping the host tree in a complex network of interlacing roots. Some species completely kill their host, whereas others just use their host for support - each species has it's own unique strategy. We even have our own new species *Ficus palungensis*, discovered in 1998 by Tim Laman and George Weiblen.



A giant strangler fig in Gunung Palung National Park stands on its network of interlacing roots after the host tree has died. © Tim Laman.

Ficus trees are a critical part of the orangutan's ecosystem, and their presence is usually an indication of a healthy forest. Although protection of orangutans is the primary target of our conservation efforts, orangutans cannot survive without their forest and the efforts of the Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation program help to preserve the other victims of deforestation and destruction. Rainforests are not singular parts. We must defend the entire ecosystem.

Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program
(GPOCP)



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