

# Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program



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## Code RED

An e-newsletter from your friends in West Kalimantan

Dear Friends and Supporters,

I have just arrived back in the US from a month long visit to the field and the Cabang Panti Research Station. We had quite a busy time, but as always, I enjoyed every minute of it. This year we had the pleasure of assisting the BBC Natural History Unit to collect rare footage of wild orangutans in Gunung Palung National Park. We will keep you posted when that documentary airs.

For the last two years we have been conducting biodiversity surveys in our Customary Forests to determine what species of plants and wildlife live there. In our first article this month, GPOCP Orangutan Survey Coordinator, Syahik Nurbani, describes some of the natural wonders they found.

In our second article, Becky Curtis, who has just finished up her year working as the Assistant Research Manager at Cabang Panti, shares some of her experiences with us. We want to sincerely thank Becky for her hard work and dedication to the project. We wish her all the best in her future endeavors and I am sure the orangutans, rainforest and especially the team, will miss her.

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World Orangutan

Did you know August 19th was World Orangutan Day? Be sure to see the sidebar about our festivities. We would also like to wish Indonesia a Happy Independence Day!

Sincerely,



Cheryl Knott, PhD  
Executive Director

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

## Biodiversity in Customary Forests

*By Syahik Nurbani, GPOCP Orangutan Survey Coordinator*

As you may recall, last year we conducted a biodiversity survey in our Customary Forests. This area represents nearly 7,500 hectares made up of five villages that is now legally protected from oil palm, mining and other destructive actions. This land now legally belongs to the community. This survey will provide baseline data so we can monitor changes in the plants and animals that call this area home. In late July and early August, we trekked out to these peat swamps again to see how they are faring. These data will provide valuable information to compare to last year and years to come.

Last year, conditions were quite difficult as the water level in the swamp was high due to heavy rain. This year, we began the surveys in the beginning of the dry season, so it was much easier to measure each transect. We used the transect line method. This method requires taking a 1 kilometer string and stretching it from end to end. Our survey team then collected information on any plants or animals that were touching the line. Of course, we are interested in orangutans as well, so we also searched for any nests in the transect areas too. We surveyed a total of 12 transects over 20 days throughout the Customary Forest area.

Day

August 19th was World Orangutan Day. This is a day to raise awareness about orangutans and the plight of their habitat. This year GPOCP held an event at Pantai Kinjil in Ketapang. We hosted a campaign with a puppet show, beach clean-up and tree planting with our youth groups and the general public!



## RI Independence Day

The Republic of Indonesia celebrated 72 years of independence on August 17th! This day is customarily filled with games and competitions such as tug-of-war and sack races. A fun day for all!



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*A male orangutan, Pongo pygmaeus wurmbii, currently listed as critically endangered by IUCN.  
Photo © Tim Laman.*

The density of orangutan nests we found ranged from 0.22 to 0.6 nests per square kilometer. This equates to approximately 16 individual orangutans calling this small area home, with many more passing through. We were also fortunate to see many other signs of wildlife. While we were not lucky enough to actually spot a Sun Bear (*Helarctos malayanus*), we were able to find signs that they were nearby. In one area we found paw prints in the mud and a tree that was clawed up from the bear searching for insects. The Sun Bear is endemic to Southeast Asia and is classified as Vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). These bears also make nests in the tree canopy, like orangutans! One way to tell a sun bear nest from an orangutan nest is by the construction. The bears tend to break the branches to make their nest, whereas the orangutans will bend the branches.



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*"Start where you  
are.*

*Use what you have.*

*Do what you can."*

*-Arthur Ashe-*





*Proboscis monkeys, Nasalis larvatus, were found along the river during our surveys. They are currently classified as Endangered by IUCN. Photo © Beth Barrow.*

Another interesting animal we ran into was the proboscis monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*). They love to hang out in the trees along the river with their family nearby. These monkeys are quite distinct with their interesting noses. The dominant male has a large, bulbous nose, while juveniles and females have smaller, more pointy noses. Proboscis monkeys are only found in Borneo and are classified as Endangered by the IUCN.

We also found many fruits and trees that orangutans like to eat. One of my favorites, although not a food for orangutans, is the *Nepenthes* genus, also known as pitcher plants. These carnivorous plants thrive in the tropical, humidity-rich, environment of Southeast Asian

rainforests. Although you may see many of these plants in your own home or garden, many species are classified as vulnerable by IUCN. They are a dazzling spectacle of colors, which makes them a favorite among ornamental plant lovers.



*Tropical pitcher plants, Nepenthes, are a carnivorous plant classified as vulnerable by IUCN.*

*Photo © GPOCP.*

GPOCP would like to sincerely thank the ARCUS Foundation for their support of this survey project. The data collected will be further analyzed and used to determine trends occurring in our Customary Forest areas.

## **A Final Forest Farewell...**

*By Becky Curtis, GPOCP Assistant Research Manager*

"She asked if you are interested in learning English," I said in Bahasa, shifting slightly on the mossy log beneath me.

"Tell her I know four different local languages," Sahril said with a proud smirk.

I turned back towards the original speaker, a visiting Boston University graduate student researcher named Faye Harwell, to relay the words in English. The three of us sat huddled among crumbling logs and fallen vines as the sun began rising through the treetops and dawn changed to a bright sunny morning.



*Akau, Faye, Becky, and Sahril drenched from the hike back to camp in the pouring rain. Photo © Faye Harwell.*

Another field assistant, Akau, perched nearby a few trees behind us, fusses over the assembly of our orangutan urine collection apparatus. We were all waiting for orangutans, Bibi, and her baby, Bayas, who are still sleeping in a nest some 15 meters above us, to wake up. Twelve hours later, after wandering behind the mother and infant pair through dense forest far from camp all day, the four of us began the hike home just as the rain began crashing down. Wading down the mangled path, I realized with a smile that my very first follow, almost eleven months earlier, was with the very same companions: Indonesian and orangutan. Back on that day however, my thumbs were as tired as my feet from relentlessly flicking through a translating dictionary to understand the handful of words Sahril and Akau would politely utter to me. Now, however, not only were the three of us conversing and joking throughout the day, but I was acting as translator to someone else. Whereas before I sat in clueless wonderment, watching the men furiously enter data into the iPad, today they asked me questions and advice on the data to input.

This morning I pick up a fruit that the orangutans dropped and tell Faye its Latin name. Earlier this year, I could barely pronounce the names, much less identify the fruit myself. Although I knew my time with the project was coming to an end, I did not know it would actually be my last follow with the project or that Bibi and Bayas were the last of the Gunung Palung orangutans that I would watch in the wild. Unforeseen circumstances unfortunately pulled me from camp sooner than expected, and



although I was greatly disappointed, I realize now how that really was the perfect end to my forest experiences as they came full circle.



*Baby orangutan, Bayas, peering down at me during an afternoon follow. Photo © Becky Curtis.*

As I counted down my last few weeks with the project, camp was at its busiest and liveliest of the entire year. Cheryl was here on her annual visit alongside her children and graduate student, Faye. Her husband, Tim Laman, was also at camp amongst a team from the BBC as they filmed orangutans for an upcoming documentary. This family, plus the new addition of a third project to camp and the researchers involved, meant that for the month of August Cabang Panti burst into a hive of activity. Several orangutans were followed daily and data poured into the lab where assistants, Syai and Rinta, stood poised at the ready with gloves and masks as endless fecal, urine and food samples were thrown their way for processing. They juggled and dove into the workload, as did Brodie, the Research Manager, in overseeing data processing alongside Cheryl.



*Becky, Brodie, Cheryl, and Rinta going over data. Photo © Faye Harwell.*

After so many months with the project, but never having met Cheryl in person, it was refreshing and enlightening to have the founding lady herself by our side. We spent many a morning all huddled on the floor around a single laptop, identifying fruit species and analyzing behavioral data. As well as busy work days, evenings were filled with entertainment, particularly with music thanks to Cheryl's daughter, Jessica, and her guitar. The bright blue instrument was passed throughout camp and Indonesian and English songs alike were regularly sung late into the evening. We also had a particular boom in the number of women at the research station, bringing a sense of femininity to the camp that is usually a little weak! Daily Yoga sessions took place on the beach while baking, bracelet making and Zumba occurred in camp. One eventful evening we had a party of henna drawing, with many of us sitting huddled closely together on a bedroom floor. I feel lucky that I have seen almost every angle of camp possible, from a work aspect as well as social. I've seen camp with two people and with thirty, with only Indonesians (other than myself) and with a rainbow of nationalities.





From left to right, Syai, Becky, Brodie, and Rinta, going over lab samples. Photo © GPOCP.

Over the course of this year, I have learnt as much about people as I have about orangutans. The lessons and knowledge I have gained from this experience, culturally and socially as well as professionally, is truly unforgettable. I not only know how to record and analyze the feeding and digestion rates of an orangutan, but I also know how to make a mean *sambal*, how to turn on a generator and I can sing along to a couple of Indo-pop songs (okay, attempt to). I will always be grateful to all my companions at camp for these memories and so much more. My gratitude, of course, extends to Cheryl and Brodie and to Terri and Wahyu, for their help throughout the year and on all problems outside the forest! My final thanks I would like to direct is to two very special and hard-working young people who are brand new to the project and whose future I believe to be very bright, Syai and Rinta, the lab assistants. I believe they are the representation of the conservation movement within the young generation of Indonesians. They not only helped me become a better leader, they also helped with my language skills and kept me smiling through the busiest of times. Alongside all the passionate staff of Gunung Palung National Park and GPOCP, they both gave me a renewed faith and comfort for the future, of not only our project, but for orangutans and Indonesian wildlife overall. What a year it has been, with so many stories created. Thanks to every human, orangutan, tree and all other critters of the forest for being part of it...minus mosquitoes and tropical diseases that is!



*Becky embracing the forest during one of her daily hikes.  
Photo © Syai Al-Mirzan.*

Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program (GPOCP)

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