



# Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program

**Code RED**

*an e-newsletter from your friends in West Kalimantan*

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Issue 91

Dear Friends and Supporters,

This summer I am unable to make my annual trip to Indonesia to visit our conservation office and field station, but this has not stopped some exciting new things from happening in and around Gunung Palung! Fortunately, the region has been minimally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. After months of precautionary work from home, businesses and offices in Ketapang are beginning to open up again, and our team have been able to resume a handful of activities. We are now carrying out biodiversity surveys in our Customary Forests, and will soon begin training these communities to carry out SMART Patrols, which help to monitor and prevent forest fires and illegal activities such as logging and poaching. At Cabang Panti, construction is underway. The National Park Office received funding to renovate and rebuild the entire camp. We are excited to have new infrastructure which will support our lab work and new buildings to house researchers and staff.

Our first article comes from Victoria Gehrke, who served as the GPOCP Program Director for over a year. Now, back in her home country of Sweden, Victoria reflects on her time in Indonesia and recounts her recent work on the Human-Orangutan Conflict survey, sharing some insightful results. We are so grateful for all of Victoria's hard work for the project during her time!

The second article comes from our newest staff member, Sumi. Sumi recently graduated from Tanjungpura University as a recipient of our West Bornean Orangutan Caring Scholarship

([WBOCS](#)). She previously conducted research for her thesis at Cabang Panti, and upon receiving her degree, Sumi returned back to camp to work as a Field Laboratory Assistant. Here, she gives you all an idea of what her day-to-day work is like.

It is now the Eid al-Adha holiday and our staff are enjoying a well-deserved break and some time with their families. Eid Mubarak to those that celebrate!

Sincerely,



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

## Insights from Indonesia: The Social Impact of Environmental Conservation

By Victoria Gehrke, GPOCP Program Director

Where can I begin in summarizing what I have learned from over a year in Borneo? I've learned about culture, kindness, community cohesiveness, communication and how these are intrinsically integrated into conservation success. Environmental conservation is not only an inter-disciplinary practice, but an inherently social one. Not just scientists, but social scientists, good managers and politicians are needed for ideal implementation and follow-through. In my career as a conservation biologist I have been lucky enough to work on a wide variety of projects in different parts of the world. Even though every project differs in approach, management, landscape, ecology, local threats, politics, economy, culture, and history, there are always common themes. These are small lessons learned – but if you had told me when I was a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed ecologist in my early twenties, with a desire and goal to protect wildlife, that I'd be working primarily with humans, I would not have believed you (and much less that I would have loved it!).







*Victoria poses alongside a massive Dipterocarp tree during one of her visits to the Cabang Panti Research Station. Photo by Patrik Skold.*

Working on the ground allows one to develop special insight into the threats faced by wildlife as well as local perspectives on conservation. My time in Borneo coincided perfectly with a project to survey local communities bordering the National Park to determine orangutan sightings in human-use areas, incidents of Human-Orangutan Conflict (HOC) and perceptions of local community members towards orangutans. The goal of the survey was to evaluate GPOCP's conservation impact and refine, if needed, our conservation program's messages and target areas. We expanded the survey to include perceptions of illegal land use, concessions and hunting, adapting the questionnaire from [Meijaard's et al.'s 2011 survey in the West Kalimantan landscape](#).

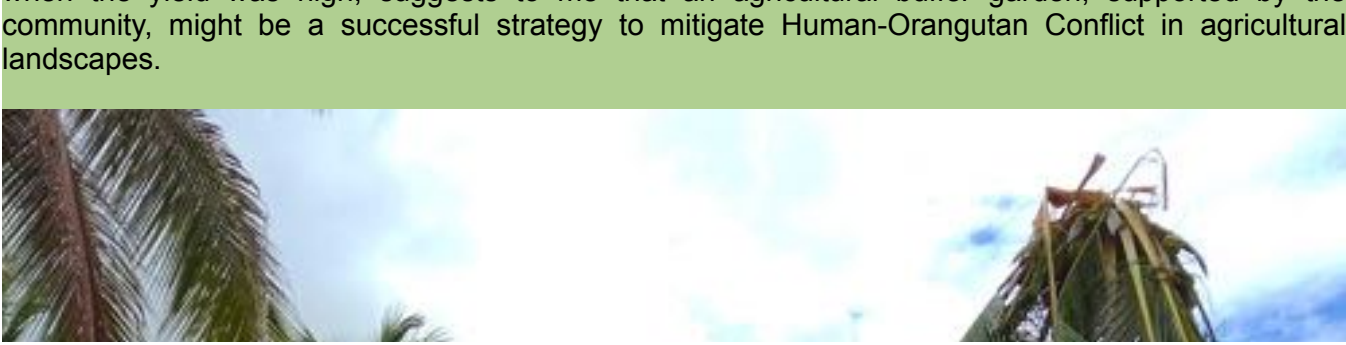




*Victoria (back row, third from right) with many members of the GPOCP staff. Also pictured is Pak Ari Wibawanto (front row, third from left), the head of the Gunung Palung National Park Office (BTNGP) during his first visit to the GPOCP office in Ketapang.*

Our preliminary analysis of the survey results (thank you to Mr. Paul Thung), reveals some interesting findings. The distance between people's cash-crops and their households surprised me at first. In many parts of the world farmland is within eyesight, or at most a short walk from the house. So it was a pleasant surprise to see these small landholders go to where the trees already are to harvest their crops, rather than planting mono-culture areas around their houses. This traditional 'gathering' style of agro-forestry helps protect these rainforest areas that harbor wildlife, including orangutans. Through our Customary Forest program we help communities establish *hutan desa*, or 'village forests' in these areas that allow local control and prevent conversion to palm oil and industrial agriculture. Despite this name, the forests are often a few hours hike from the actual village and thus in semi-wild landscapes.

Of those families who had gardens adjacent to or within 500m of a forest, our survey found that almost all had experienced visits from orangutans at some point, and all of those orangutans had damaged their crops in some way. But what about the farmers' reaction to the orangutans destroying their crops? Was GPOCP's conservation message of protecting orangutans working? The farmers' behavior revealed a somewhat logical perspective, even if not completely agreeable to conservationists. Anecdotal reports, from personal witnesses on more than one occasion, describe that the 'level of aggression' towards orangutans varied according to the relative success of that year's agricultural yield. If the orangutans visited their garden and caused damage, but the farmer already had a large yield that year, then there was less animosity than in a bad year, even if the same number of crops were damaged or eaten. This variation in response, with a tolerance for sharing when the yield was high, suggests to me that an agricultural buffer garden, supported by the community, might be a successful strategy to mitigate Human-Orangutan Conflict in agricultural landscapes.







*Coconut trees that were damaged by one or more orangutans in the Penjalaan Village.*

Most respondents of the social survey who talked about Human-Orangutan Conflict said they would chase an orangutan away if it entered their garden by making noise, throwing objects, or sometimes by firing a gun. However, they stated that they would not shoot directly at or harm the orangutans, which we consider a conservation success deriving from education and outreach. Furthermore, practically all respondents were aware that orangutans are legally protected in Indonesia, and almost everyone agreed they *should* be protected. Common reasons provided for why they should be protected included that they are a rare species faced with extinction, are similar to humans in terms of intelligence, are important seed dispersers, and some even said that they don't disturb people or their gardens – all messages GPOCP tries to convey in our environmental education material! Many respondents also mentioned that orangutans should be protected to prevent people from hunting and killing them, and that they would report it to the authorities if they found protected animals that were hunted, traded, or kept as pets. From my own perspective, after immersing myself in understanding the local threats to orangutans and how GPOCP works to combat those threats, this is a huge conservation success in terms of positive perceptions of orangutans and wildlife.

When asked about hunting for bush-meat or for the pet trade, many survey respondents reported that hunting occurred for animals other than orangutans. They also pointed to outsiders coming in to their villages to hunt illegally. In two of the surveyed villages respondents indicated a strong presence of illegal hunting carried out by employees of oil palm and mining companies. These results show that hunting is not a village-confined activity and that programs which aim to educate and raise awareness, specifically about hunting, should include not only areas which immediately border the National Park, but also employees from local industries. This finding has prompted GPOCP to re-evaluate our conservation awareness strategy, and the first steps have been made for a pilot program to launch environmental education for a local oil palm company who has shown promising steps towards sustainability.



*Adult female orangutan Walimah, at the Cabang Panti Research Station, was the first completely wild orangutan that Victoria ever observed. Photo by Victoria Gehrke.*

I choose to work for GPOCP because of this fantastic community-based approach. After having seen it up close up, I am even more convinced that this is the key to conservation success. All the credit goes to the tireless managers, their enthusiastic teams and the formidable community leaders! I thought I would most miss the tropical birds, towering trees and monkeys when heading back to Europe, but I find myself missing the Indonesian people the most. I am so thankful for every single person I met in Indonesia, who in every instance taught me something new, from a British jungle girl who spoke Indonesian as fluently as English and could skip up a forested mountain no problem (but constantly tripped up the stairs!), to a fantastically forward-thinking local politician who provided the best sweet tea to entice good natured political debates, to a local English teacher who was as sassy as she was stylish and always greeted me with a smile. I'll miss the staff regaling me with the latest education expedition or field trip adventure, and hearing stories about who saw which bird over the weekend or who tried some crazy western food. I am so thankful for their patience working with me in my broken Indonesian, and for explaining the endless acronyms that Indonesians have made into what seems like their own second language. Thank you to all the international partners, donors and supporters with whom I have been in contact. You have all taught me new things in one shape or another – life is a never ending opportunity to learn!

## My Daily Life in Another World

Rv Sumihadi Field Laboratory Assistant



My name is Sumihadi, but most people call me Sumi. I currently work as a Laboratory Assistant at Cabang Panti. I'm an alumna of the Department of Biology at Tanjungpura University in Pontianak, Indonesia. I am also one of the 2014 recipients of the West Bornean Orangutan Caring Scholarship (WBOCS). I am so grateful for the benefits I have gotten from the BOCS program over the past six years. It feels like a gift to be able to work here, and I am fortunate for the opportunity to experience working and living in this small paradise within Borneo.

I first visited Gunung Palung in 2017 to intern and later returned in 2018 to conduct research for my undergraduate thesis. I studied the distribution and density of ficus trees, as they are an important food source for a wide variety of animals, including orangutans. In January, after I graduated with a degree in biology, I was given the opportunity to return to Cabang Panti and begin training to work here. I have been here ever since!



*From left to right: Sumi, student researcher Ulda, student researcher Octha, and former lab assistant Rinta. All four women were recipients of the West Bornean Orangutan Caring Scholarship and attended Universitas Tanjungpura.*

Indonesia has amazingly diverse natural resources, with an abundance of both flora and fauna. Therefore, it is important and necessary to preserve this biodiversity. Building a variety of nature conservation protection areas such as nature reserves, wildlife sanctuaries, and national parks helps to protect the species that inhabit these areas. There are 54 National Parks in Indonesia, one of which is Gunung Palung National Park (GPNP). Many people that live around here are aware of the

which is Gunung Palung National Park (GPNP). Many people that live around here are aware of the research station, but few get to experience what goes on first-hand. I am here to share my knowledge and experience as one of the staff that is working at Cabang Panti, and explain what I do each day.

For my job as a laboratory assistant I am responsible for processing orangutan urine and fecal samples that are collected by the field assistants that work here. I also work with plant samples such as fruit, flowers, leaves and tree bark, which are eaten by orangutans. It's my job to identify, photograph and weigh these samples, and then dry them for nutritional analysis.



*Each day Sumi processes urine and fecal samples collected from wild orangutans. Here she works to preserve genetics fecal samples by storing them in silica gel.*

In addition to processing samples, I sometimes join the field assistants on follows to help collect the samples. I also do administrative work, by helping with data entry and management and organizing all the data that gets collected on iPads and GPS units. I help to keep the lab organized and regularly inventory all of our equipment.





*Sumi processes plant samples as part of our research on orangutan diet. By collecting careful, detailed data on plant samples and preserving them in our drying oven and dehydrator, we can analyze the nutritional content of these wild plants.*

When there are no orangutans to follow, I go into the forest to search for orangutans. Over the past few months many interesting things have happened when I enter the forest alone. It is the most exciting when I stumble upon wild animals that I have never seen before. Within the Cabang Panti research vicinity there are not only orangutans, but many rare animals such as hornbills, wild cats, sun bears, civets and unique insects. I hope to continue observing more of this amazing biodiversity as I continue to work here!

Being at Cabang Panti has added a new energy to my life; it's difficult to express in words how proud and happy I am to be here. I am surrounded by beautiful nature with diverse animals and plants. All my coworkers and friends care for one another and we are all so comfortable being here. It is so much different than the world I was previously living in. Life at Cabang Panti is life being in a different, very peaceful, world.





*Sumi shows off a very large leaf found on the forest floor!*

*“If you think you're too small to have an impact, try going to bed with a mosquito in the room.”*

*- Anita Roddick*



### **Our Contact Information**

Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program  
P.O. Box G  
1661 Massachusetts Ave  
Lexington, MA 92420  
1-617-353-7723

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