



Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program

YAYASAN PALUNG

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an e-newsletter from your friends in West Kalimantan

Dear Friends and Supporters,

As we finish out this year, and enter a new one, I am filled with joy and pride from the many successes of 2021. I'm incredibly thankful for our many supporters from around the world, helping us to continue the fight to [#SaveWildOrangutans](#).

To reflect on some of our accomplishments this year, Program Coordinator, Natalie Robinson, has written our first article. She shares some highlights from both our research and conservation programs.

Our second article comes from a long-time GPOCP partner, Andrea Johnson. Andrea first came to Gunung Palung as the field research manager in 1999. Then from 2000-2001, she ran our first orangutan population census, before working in the Yayasan Palung conservation office as interim Field Director until 2002. In 2017, Andrea joined GPOCP's Board of Directors and is our Secretary. Andrea now works as an Advisor and Consultant for the Climate and Land Use Alliance and lives in Costa Rica. Here, she writes about memories from her time running our first orangutan population survey and exploring the uncharted forests of Gunung Palung National Park. Now, 20 years later, she shares the exciting findings from our latest survey, carried out from 2019-2020. Read on to find out just how remarkable these results are!

It is thanks to supporters like you that we have been able to continue this work over the past two decades. It is so exciting to see that our work is making a real impact on the wild orangutans of Gunung Palung National Park.

I wish you all a happy and healthy new year!

Sincerely,



Cheryl Knott, PhD
Executive Director

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

A 2021 Recap

By Natalie Robinson, Program Coordinator

It's difficult to believe another year has already come to an end while we are still living in the strange new realities of COVID-19. Though foreign staff members have been back in their home countries since March 2020, we've been fortunate to keep busy at GPOCP, and have made great strides towards the conservation of wild orangutans.

At the beginning of 2021, we held our [annual meeting](#). Staff from both our conservation and research teams joined together to share the accomplishments of the previous year and discuss goals for the coming year.



The GPOCP/Yayasan Palung Conservation and Research Staff join together during the 2021 Annual Meeting.

In February, we carried out the first [Environmental Education Expeditions](#) of the year, traveling to remote villages in Ketapang Regency, and welcomed the newest members of our volunteer youth group, REBONK, during the [10th annual inauguration](#) ceremony.

Later that month, we published an exciting new article in *Biological Conservation* which highlights our [25 years of research and conservation](#) on orangutans in Gunung Palung National Park, as well as another article about [confronting ethical challenges](#) in long-term research programs. We then signed a [new formal agreement](#) with the National Park Bureau to continue to strengthen our working relationship over the next 5 years.

We celebrated the defense of two PhD dissertations in March, from [Dr. Andrea Blackburn](#) and [Dr. Amy Scott](#), both of whom conducted their dissertation field research at Cabang Panti Research Station. They later graduated from Boston University, officially receiving their PhDs in May.

In April we were honored to have our project [featured in *The Atlantic* magazine](#), in an article written by Wudan Yan. The piece highlights stories from Executive Director Dr. Cheryl Knott, Field Research Assistants Sahril Ramadani and Sabta Pelari, and Research Director Wahyu Susanto. This feature focuses on the invaluable role which local collaborators play in field research, which is why our project has been able to continue since the onset of the pandemic.

We then celebrated Earth Day, which followed the theme “Restore our Earth.” Our many youth group members and West Bornean Orangutan Caring Scholarship students organized and ran a variety of [in-person and online activities](#).



Two primary school students from Matan Jaya Village participate in an in-class activity, led by our Environmental Education team.

We also selected [six new students](#) for West Bornean Orangutan Caring Scholarships (WBOCS), and this 10th class of recipients was officially [awarded and recognized](#) in May. These well-deserving students have now completed their first semester of university classes, as they continue on their journey of becoming the next generation of conservationists.

Later in May, we completed a series of tree planting projects to rehabilitate land that was previously burned, surrounding three of the Customary Forests. A total of [6,000 tree seedlings were planted](#), including rubber trees, *betel* nut, *petai* bean and *jengkol* bean.

In June, we collaborated with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) to conduct a [Site-level Assessment of Governance and Equity](#) (SAGE) in the Banjar Lestari Customary Forest. We were proud to help pilot this tool, which aims to enable stakeholders to assess the status of governance and equity, plan actions to improve, and monitor progress. We rounded out the month by celebrating World Rainforest Day, [making videos](#) and participating in [Rainforest Live](#).

In July, we released a new edition of our Indonesian language newsletter, [MlaS](#), focusing on the theme “Wise management of natural resources in an effort to reduce the impact of climate change.”



A member of the Rintis Betunas group in Riam Berasap Village clears land to make way for new horticultural crops.

We celebrated [World Orangutan Day](#) in August. In September, we commenced a series of [biodiversity surveys](#) throughout each of our Customary Forests and witnessed a [fascinating interaction](#) between an adult female orangutan and a Bornean slow loris.

Throughout October, members of the Customary Forest Management Boards (LPHD) continued to carry out Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART) patrols, in order to monitor forest activity, searching for signs of fire or logging, taking note of wildlife and changes in vegetation.

In November, we celebrated [Orangutan Caring Week](#) with a series of events run by our youth volunteers and WBOCS recipients. GPOCP-supported master's student and long-time collaborator, Endro Setiawan, [defended his thesis and graduated](#) cum laude, receiving accolades for having the highest GPA among graduate students at the National University (UNAS) this year. In the US, graduate and undergraduate students [presented on their orangutan research](#) at the Northeastern Evolutionary Primatologists (NEEP) annual meeting, which we helped host at Boston University.



Members of the REBONK youth group pose at a scenic overlook during a field trip to Lubuk Baji campsite, within the National Park.

In December we finalized the building design and began purchasing materials to build our satellite camp in the *Rankong* degraded forest area, where [we've begun additional research](#), between Cabang Panti and the edge of the National Park. Construction is set to begin in January 2022.

In total, our research team have spent over 3,200 hours following wild orangutans, collecting behavioral data. Researchers have collected over 220 fecal samples and 90 urine samples. More than 750 new feeding trees were tagged, and we continued the monitoring of two different long-term phenological datasets throughout the research area.

The staff at Cabang Panti Research Station and the Yayasan Palung conservation office have continued to persevere, step into new roles, and take on new challenges, despite the still ongoing pandemic. We are grateful for everyone's hard work and optimistic that the next year will bring even more successes!

Our latest orangutan census shows the fruit of 20 years of conservation work

By Andrea Johnson, GPOCP Board Member and Secretary

We have some pretty cool news to share. But first, travel back in time with me for a moment.

Early 2001: For the last year I had been working with Dr. Cheryl Knott's orangutan project in the world's most beautiful place. I had waited for the Y2K "end of the world" while watching stars from the sandy banks of the *Air Putih River*, no possible internet connection to be blown; I had listened to the 2000 US election chaos unfold over a staticky short wave radio ("something about 'hanging Chad'?"). And now, my research visa was expiring, but I was a young and hungry 20-something, and I wanted more. So when she said, "we really want to do Gunung Palung National Park's first orangutan population census", I was like: sign me UP!



The team of rangers, field researchers and porters from our first orangutan population census in 2001. Throughout the survey we partnered with the Gunung Palung National Park Bureau. The team included National Park rangers, local villagers, our long-term staff, and Indonesian students.

Turns out that counting orangutans isn't as simple as you might think. There's a reason these reclusive souls have survived and prospered in the high, tangled forest canopies of Borneo! Population surveys are therefore done not by counting animals but by counting the evidence they leave behind: the nests they make to sleep in each night, and sometimes for daytime rest or play or defensive spaces too. By figuring out the density of nests in different habitat types, you can estimate the density of orangutan individuals and eventually calculate a figure across the whole 108,044 hectares of National Park.

Of course there are some steps between counting nests along a transect and arriving at a population figure! I had no idea what I was signing up for – I'd spent my time at Cabang Panti Research Station, where the trails were clearly marked, the forest was intact, the water was clean and the living was (relatively) easy. But to survey the entire park meant navigating up new rivers, cutting machete trails for hours through steep terrain, battling mosquito swarms to set up camp in peat swamps, and spending months scanning for rotting wads of leaves 20 meters above our heads. To carry out this feat we partnered with the Gunung Palung National Park Bureau and our team included rangers, local porters, our long-term staff, and Indonesian students. We also did extra sampling in the forests of Gunung Palung's northern buffer zone, to understand whether orangutans were still using this degraded, heavily logged habitat. We walked kilometers of *kuda-kuda* skid trails, muddy mazes of destruction built to pull giant trees out of the forest's depths towards downstream sawmills; my heart broke at least as many times as our outboard motor did.



Left: An orangutan nest above kuda-kuda skid trails, used to pull illegally logged trees from the forest

Right: Research assistant Rhanda (Landa) searches for orangutan nests. Landa has been part of the orangutan project since its start, and still works for GPOCP today!

It's also not a simple A-to-B calculation to get from "how many nests" to "how many orangutans". You need answers to a lot of really specific questions: questions we could only answer because of the long-term data collection that Cheryl had begun in the mid-1990s. For example: Do all orangutans make nests? (Yes, except for the 11% that are dependent offspring.) How many nests does an orangutan make each day? (1.16, on average, although adult males apparently take more naps than other age-sex classes!) Or how long does a nest last between being built and completely falling apart? (It depends on forest type, but between 259 and 399 days). I apparently taught myself not only population modelling and statistical software packages but also something called "Markov chain analysis" which applied matrix mathematics to estimate how long it takes an orangutan nest to decay. (Like I said: young and hungry...)

The end result of all that work was our estimate of approximately 2500 individuals within Gunung Palung National Park – a scale of magnitude greater than the only existing guesstimate. This [peer-reviewed finding](#) solidified what we already suspected: GP was one of the world's critical remaining habitats for Bornean orangutans.

And twenty years later, it still is. I am excited and proud to begin to share with you the topline results from the latest population survey done in 2019-2020. Research led by Beth Barrow, currently GPOCP's Conservation Research Director, estimates the population of orangutans to remain at over 2000 individuals. The analysis is still being finalized –

and there are changes to habitat maps and sampling methodology that any good scientist should note as a caution against simple comparisons – but it's clear that the population has remained relatively stable.

In the context of so many years of compounded threats – logging, poaching, forest conversion and fragmentation – I want to call this stability a minor miracle. Except it's not a "miracle" at all: it's the result of over 20 years of dedicated conservation efforts by researchers, National Park officials, and local organizations, with GPOCP leading the way.



Andrea stands beside Indonesian counterpart, Monalisa Pasaribu, during the survey in 2001 (left) and at the GP30+ Conference/Reunion in 2015 (right). Monalisa, as well as Bhayu Pamungkas, both co-authors on the final paper from the 2001 census, worked closely with Andrea on all aspects of the field work.

When I was working at Cabang Panti in 2000-01, we listened with desperation to the chainsaws coming closer and closer, watched the skies go dark with catastrophic seasonal fires, wept when our colleagues at a community forestry program in the Park's buffer zone were violently forced to flee by illegal timber barons. Things got even worse before they began to get better. And through it all, GPOCP stuck around. There is no doubt in my mind that the long-term research presence, the tireless advocacy and relationship-building and investment in community livelihoods that Cheryl and other colleagues have been doing since 2001, is the reason Gunung Palung still has one of the world's remaining sizable populations of Bornean orangutans.

Another important and hopeful finding of our 2001 census was that orangutans were perfectly capable of living in logged forest areas – we found them there at densities similar to undisturbed forests. The latest survey, however, finds that densities are significantly lower in heavily disturbed habitats, suggesting that the cumulative impact of various human pressures does take its toll. For a long-lived species like orangutans, what happens to their habitat over the next twenty years is what really matters.

Sticking around may not sound particularly sexy. But it's essential – it's how real protection happens. This newest survey gives us evidence that our approach works. And GPOCP can't do it without you.

Management of Cabang Panti Research Station is conducted by the Gunung Palung National Park Office (BTN-GP) in collaboration with GPOCP/YP. Scientific research is carried out in conjunction with the Universitas Nasional (UNAS) and Boston University.

*"Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is a process;
working together is success."*

- Henry Ford

