

Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program

YAYASAN PALUNG

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an e-newsletter from your
friends in West Kalimantan

Dear Friends and Supporters,

This month marked the end of the fasting month of Ramadan and our staff in Indonesia celebrated the Idul Fitri holiday. The holiday also coincided with the celebration of Earth Day. Our first article, written by Petrus Kanisius (Pit), outlines the many activities held in Ketapang and Kayong Utara regencies to commemorate this day when people around the world celebrate planet Earth.

The second article this month was written by Laura Brubaker-Wittman, my PhD student at Boston University, who is currently conducting her dissertation research in Gunung Palung. Laura first traveled to the site in 2019, and after long COVID-19 related travel delays, made it back to Indonesia last summer. She writes about some of her research objectives and goals for the coming months as she wraps up her field research.

Here in Boston, we were thrilled to host Dr. Sri Suci Utami Atmoko who gave a talk at Boston University on her orangutan research at Tuanan Research Station in Central Kalimantan. Dr. Utami Atmoko has been a close friend since 1994 when we first met as graduate students. She is one of the world's leading orangutan researchers and we were honored by her visit and the opportunity to meet with her.

I wish you all a happy and healthy May!

Sincerely,



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Cheryl Knott, PhD
Executive Director

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



Dr. Utami Atmoko (third from right) visits Boston University to present about ongoing orangutan research in Borneo and Sumatra.

Celebrating Earth Day 2023

By Petrus Kanisius, Environmental Education Officer & Communications Coordinator

To commemorate Earth Day this year, Yayasan Palung/GPOCP carried out a series of activities throughout Ketapang and Kayong Utara regencies in the time leading up to the holiday, which occurred on April 22. This year was a little bit different, because Earth Day coincided with the celebration of the Idul Fitri (Eid al-Fitr) holiday, one of the holiest times in Indonesia. As a result, all of the Earth Day activities happened a bit early this year.

On April 14, we hosted an event to plant tree seedlings. More than 100 *Areca* palms were planted around Jalan Karya Tani in Ketapang. This event also supported the government program “Gerakan Penanaman Satu Juta Pohon” (the One Million Tree Planting Movement). This activity was carried out by YP/GPOCP in collaboration with our Ketapang-based youth group, RK-TAJAM.



Participants from YP/GPOCP, as well as many other local organizations, pose together after the tree planting event held in honor of Earth Day.

Also in attendance were members of IKAHUT UNTAN in Ketapang (a group of alumni from the Forestry Program at Tanjungpura University), including the head, Pak Adi Mulia. Other guests came from the Ketapang Military Command, the Gunung Palung National Park Office, the Ketapang Education Office, the Ketapang Regional Disaster Management Agency, the South Ketapang Forest Management Unit, other local youth groups, and students from Ketapang junior and senior high schools. Support for the purchase of the 100 seedlings was provided by the Ketapang Regency PerkimLH (Public Housing, Residential Areas and Environment Service).

YP/GPOCP Field Director, Edi Rahman, gave opening remarks at this celebration to thank participants for joining together for this event of mutual concern. Edi also took the opportunity to remind all parties to continue to care for the environment, especially now that it is the dry season in West Kalimantan, so that everyone is extra vigilant to help ensure forest and land fires do not occur in this fire-prone region.



Members of the Universitas Tanjungpura Forestry Alumni group (IKAHUT UNTAN), including YP/GPOCP's Field Director Edi Rahman and Environmental Education Manager Widiya Octa Selfiany (standing far right) who are also UNTAN alumni, plant a symbolic tree together.

Meanwhile in Kayong Utara, Earth Day was celebrated on April 13, during the holy fasting month of Ramadan. To celebrate both holidays, the Bentangor Kids club broke the fast together and practiced using various used goods to re-purpose to make artwork.



Members of the Bentangor Kids club use newspaper and other recycled goods to create crafts.

The Simpang Keramat Kids club participated in Earth Day activities on April 14, planned by REBONK youth group members and the YP/GPOCP Environmental Education Team. They also broke the fast and made creations from recycled goods. These activities help teach children about the importance of caring for the environment, and produce a tangible piece of art they can keep as a reminder of what they learned.

Lastly, on April 15, the REBONK youth group members listened to a series of presentations delivered by YP/GPOCP's Simon and Widiya. Members from Sustainable Livelihoods farming and artisan groups also attended. Topics covered included Earth Day and Environmentalism, and Gender Equality. After the presentations, the group broke the fast together.



The Simpang Keramat Kids club, alongside REBONK youth group members, pose with their picture frames made of recycled goods.

A Long-Awaited Return to Indonesia for My Dissertation Research

By Laura Brubaker-Wittman, Boston University PhD Candidate

This is Laura Brubaker-Wittman and I am so happy to have finally made it to Indonesia! Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indonesian government halted the issuance of research visas for the past couple of years. Finally, in June 2022, I was one of the first researchers to have my permit approved. I am a Fulbright Fellow, which enabled me to first spend three months in the beautiful city of Yogyakarta, taking lessons to further develop my Indonesian language skills before starting my research at Cabang Panti and the Rangkong camp in Gunung Palung National Park.

As one of Dr. Knott's PhD students, I study the behavior and the health of unhabituated orangutans and compare them with habituated orangutans. Habituation is the process of an orangutan becoming used to human presence, so that we can follow them through the forest, record their behavior and collect urine and fecal samples without disturbing them. But, when we meet a new orangutan for the first time, they are often surprised to see us! They aren't quite sure what humans are; are we friends or predators? Sometimes they will hide high up in a tree or run away, or they might make kiss-squeak vocalizations or curiously study us while they eat and sit on a branch. As time goes by, the orangutans become more familiar with us, realizing that we are just curious about them as well! Eventually, they seem to ignore us, going about their day while we take data.



Laura observes a wild orangutan.

For my research, I am studying the various ways unhabituated orangutans react to humans. Why does one orangutan hide while another runs away? One difference may be because of their age or sex. For example, if an adult female orangutan has a baby with her, she might find that it is easier to hide because

then she does not have to worry about carrying the baby while running away. Or, it might depend on fruit availability. If an orangutan encounters humans while eating fruit and there isn't another fruit tree nearby, the orangutan may decide it is better to stay and eat than to leave.

With the new research camp in the Rangkong area, we have been able to follow and study many unhabituated orangutans! In March, I spent a week there following an unhabituated flanged male with field research assistants Herman and Hassan. The flanged male did not run away from us, but he did kiss-squeak a lot and stared at us from his resting spot in the tree. He also encountered a female orangutan with her baby. At first, she was nervous, but the flanged male acted calm, and she seemed to follow his lead. They hung out in a tree together very close to us for hours! Maybe the orangutans help to habituate each other!



Field research assistants Udin, Hassan and Dika (left to right) during an orangutan follow.

I also collect fecal samples which I will later test for cortisol levels at the national BRIN labs in Bogor, just south of Jakarta. I am excited for this collaboration with Dr. Taufiq Nugraha who helped establish the protocol for measuring fecal cortisol levels in wild orangutans. Working with my Indonesian counterparts, including Dr. Nugraha, all the amazing field assistants at Cabang Panti and the Rangkong, the field lab assistants, Sumi and Ishma, and the GPOCP Research Manager, Rizal, has been such an incredible and rewarding experience. Their hard work and dedication to the research and conservation work done by GPOCP and Yayasan Palung is so inspiring!

In fact, as a final component of my research, I am conducting an ethnographic study focusing on the field assistants of Cabang Panti. I am curious about their thoughts on orangutans and the relationships they build with these animals. I have learned about the importance of mutual understanding between humans and orangutans and how this makes our research that much richer and fuller. I am so impressed by everyone I work with and humbled to be a part of their and the orangutans' lives.



Laura practices sample analysis at the BRIN (National Research and Innovation Agency) lab in Bogor.

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.

"An understanding of the natural world and what's in it is a source of not only a great curiosity but great fulfillment."

– Sir David Attenborough