



Dear Friends and Supporters,

Fall is underway here in the Northeastern United States and the semester is bustling with new and ongoing projects. This term I am teaching *The Ape Within*, which is a fun and fascinating course about ape behavior and biology from an evolutionary perspective, and I have the opportunity to encourage students to think about the ways that orangutans, humans, and the other apes are similar and different from one another and from us. It is always a student favorite, as well as one of my own!

I am thrilled to announce that we have a new Deputy Director, Dr. Caitlin O'Connell. Caitlin was one of my graduate students at Boston University who completed her PhD in 2019. Caitlin conducted ground-breaking research on parasites and sociality in wild orangutans. She brought a high-powered microscope to study orangutan parasites directly in the field, an important step in understanding the health challenges of this endangered species. During her time at Cabang Panti, Caitlin developed a deep passion for orangutans and their conservation – a passion which she will be turning into action as she joins the conservation leadership team.

Our amazing team in Indonesia has been balancing the usual rigor of our research and conservation initiatives with the challenges of the fire season. In this month's issue of *Code RED*, you will hear from Robi Kasianus, our Hutan Desa officer, about wildfires that threatened our village forest areas this month, and the heroic efforts of the folks that prevented catastrophe. Massive forest fires are growing in size and frequency in many places around the world. While these fires

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are in part caused by climate change, they also contribute to it. Much of what burns in Indonesia is peat forest, so these fires cause enormous carbon release into the atmosphere. It is estimated that the 2015 fire season, for example, released 1.75 billion tons of greenhouse gas equivalents. Fire prevention and fighting have become major parts of our conservation programs, and Robi's account will give you an idea of what it looks like on the ground.

As we hope for an end to fire season in Indonesia, I wish you all a safe and healthy October!

Sincerely,



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

## Yayasan Palung and Village Forest Management Boards (LPHD) Fight Fires

*By Robi Kasianus, Village Forest Field Officer*

From August 2023 to early September 2023, Ketapang Regency and North Kayong Regency experienced a particularly dry period. During the dry season, peatland areas are very vulnerable to fire, and we have seen an increase in the frequency and severity of fires in recent years. These fires, especially in peat forests, can often be attributed to the behavior of a few people who clear land by burning it, which results in fires spreading to community lands. Some people who clear land by burning are trying avoid the large costs that would be incurred by using other methods, since burning is very easy and fast, but they do not think about the impact it will have.



*Fire burns at night near one of the Hutan Desa (village forest) areas that we work with in the village of Padu Banjar.*

During this exceptionally dry period, the village forest areas that are supported by Yayasan Palung were threatened by fire. The source of the fire came from land that was controlled by the community and the fire spread and started approaching the village forest area. Based on monitoring carried out by Yayasan Palung, there were several active fires in village forest areas, including Padu Banjar Village, Pemangkat Village, and Nipah Kuning Village. The fire in Padu Banjar Village was  $\pm 300$  meters from the Village Forest, in Nipah Kuning Village  $\pm 500$  meters. Near Padu Banjar, a total of two hectares were burned. These fires resulted in losses for the community, especially people whose land already had plants, both perennials (Palm, Rubber, Jengkol, Petai and so on) as well as horticultural plants, especially pineapple which is a favorite plant on peatlands.





*Firefighting in the village of Padu Banjar*

The Village Forest Management Boards (LPHD) lead the effort to prevent forest and land fires from spreading to village forest areas. They take action by monitoring the fire and extinguishing the fires using LPHD's fire extinguishing equipment, which was provided by Yayasan Palung. Pak Juhari (a member of the Nipah Kuning LPHD) said that the fire extinguisher provided by Yayasan Palung was of great benefit in extinguishing the forest and land fires that occurred. This is because the fire extinguishing tool (water pump machine) is very easy to carry to the fire location because it is very light ( $\pm 11$  Kilograms). However, the difficult with extinguishing fires tin the field is that water sources become scarce due to the hot season, so the distance of the water source to the location of the fire means that the hose from the water pump machine cannot reach the location of the fire. Luckily the LPHD members had received training on how to address this, and resolved the problem by making a well near the location of the fire.





*Fire fighting in the villages of Pemangkat (top) and Nipah Kuning (bottom).*

In their efforts to extinguish forest and land fires around this village forest area the LPHD collaborates with the Indonesian National Army, Police, Forest Management Unit, Kayong, Manggala Agni, Regional Disaster Management Agency, village government, Fire Care Society (MPA) and various other parties. Yayasan Palung's role in these efforts to extinguish forest and land fires is providing support for LPHD operational needs in the field.

With the hard work of all parties and rain in mid-September, the fires were controlled and did not spread to several village forests. Now, burnt land outside the village forest is being rehabilitated or planted with various types of plants such as Jengkol and Petai and various types of horticultural plants (corn, watermelon, pineapple). This rehabilitation activity was directly carried out by LPHD and Yayasan Palung, with the support of the Kayong Utara forest management unit that provided various types of plant seeds. There are two LPHDs that have carried out rehabilitation activities in burned areas, namely the Padu Banjar Village LPHD and the Pemangkat Village LPHD.





*Forest rehabilitation began as soon as the fires were extinguished in the village of Padu Banjar.*

## My Return to Gunung Palung

*By Caitlin O'Connell, Deputy Director*

Hello to all our friends and supporters! I am thrilled to be back working with GPOCP again as the new Deputy Director, a position I started in July. I first traveled to Indonesia in 2010 as a first-year PhD student working with our Executive Director, Dr. Cheryl Knott. I spent the summer in Gunung Palung National Park exploring my ideas for my dissertation research and falling in love with the forest and the orangutans. I returned from 2013-2014 and collected data for my thesis on the [social behavior](#) and [health](#) of orangutans under different ecological conditions. Since completing my Ph.D., I have held postdoctoral positions at the University of Southern California and Rutgers University, continuing to study how changes and challenges



in the environment impact the health of orangutans. For the last two years I have been a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, teaching a wide variety of biological anthropology courses and mentoring students. All the while, I have remained connected to GPOCP through continued collaboration on understanding the parasite infection patterns of the orangutans over time – an important indicator of health in orangutans themselves as well as the environment.



*Top: Dinner at camp during Ramadan in 2010. Long-time research staff members Rhanda (third from the left) and Hassan (third person back on the right in black shirt) and myself (right).*

*Bottom: Most of the research camp crew in 2010, including long-time GPOCP/YP team members Hassan (far left in red), Wahyu our Research Director (in front wearing black), myself (towards the center in yellow), Executive Director Cheryl Knott (towards center and front in pink), and Cheryl's kids, Russell and Jessica (next to and in front of Cheryl).*



After taking on my new role as Deputy Director, I traveled back to Indonesia this summer for the first time in 9 years! It was a thrilling homecoming for me, reconnecting with team members I have not seen in a long while, seeing all our incredible programs in action and how they have grown over time, and visiting my favorite spot in the world – Cabang Panti Research Station. While there, I got to follow the orangutan, Bibi, who I spent many, many days with during my dissertation research. I was struck by the similarities between Bibi's current dependent offspring, Bayas, and her older daughter Berani who was around Bayas' age last time I was there. Both Bayas and Berani seemed to struggle with independence from Bibi a bit. I have an even greater appreciation for watching these mother-offspring interactions now, as I had my own children in the interim. Independence can be hard for both mother and offspring!





*Toto and myself, watching an orangutan in 2013 (top). Examining parasites from orangutan feces in 2014 (bottom).*

While at the research camp I also got to reconnect with Hassan and Toto, two of our long-time field assistants that I have known since 2010 and 2013, respectively. We have spent countless hours together (I am suppressing the urge to go calculate those hours from the database!) following orangutans, chatting after meals, and having forest adventures. In the years since I was last at camp, there have been marriages, children, and other milestones among us, and I look forward to creating new memories with Hassan and Toto and the whole team.

Many of our research and conservation staff have been with us for just as long, and it was so exciting to see so many familiar faces. Having people throughout our organization that have this long-term perspective to reflect on how things have changed over time is invaluable. I had the opportunity to visit many of our conservation programs and I was blown away by how they have expanded and the degree to which they are embedded in and driven by members of the local community. The village forest program, aquaculture for sustainable livelihoods, the use of drones for research and conservation monitoring – all of these (and more!) are new to me, and I have learned so much in just a few short months.





*Caitlin with long-time research field assistants Toto (top) and Hassan (bottom) this summer 2023 at Cabang Panti.*

While I will mostly be working from home in suburban Philadelphia, I am so excited to be able to call the entire GPOCP/Yayasan Palung team my colleagues and co-workers. During my visit, I was so impressed by the breadth and depth of expertise in our organization, and I am eager to apply my own expertise and passion for conservation to furthering our mission and supporting all our programs and staff. I am looking forward to working together to improve the wellbeing of people, forests, and orangutans and sharing that journey with you all.





*I went with members of our leadership and conservation teams to visit with participants of our Sustainable Livelihoods program, along with our guests from the Leakey Foundation visit this summer 2023.*

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*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.*