

Now an ordeal by fire

Borneo's dwindling numbers of orangutans are facing a new and deadly threat to their survival

By Yenni Kwok



A young orangutan in Wanariset. Photo: Greenpeace

The forest fires burning in Indonesia have endangered the health of millions of people across Southeast Asia, strained relations between Jakarta and its neighbors and earned the Indonesian government the contempt of environmentalists around the world. Almost overlooked in all this has been the devastating effect on wildlife – particularly on Asia's only great ape (and man's closest relative), the orangutan.

But the consequences are distressingly visible at the Wanariset research center, a seven-hectare sanctuary carved out of the forests of East Kalimantan. The facility is home to about 70 orangutans, most of them orphaned youngsters. They make a pitiful sight, huddled together for comfort much as human children would after suffering severe emotional trauma. And that is what has happened to these infants. Their mothers are dead, slaughtered by poachers after being driven out of the forest by the fires.

Killing mother apes and kidnapping the offspring is the preferred tactic of the poachers, who then sell the young orangutans into the pet trade. The ones at Wanariset have escaped finishing up on a leash, but their future is

still parlous. Once the threat from the fires has passed, they will have to be put back into the forests – a process that is never easy. With the youngsters are three female adults suffering from serious injuries. One has a fractured skull, another a slashing wound on the back and the third has had an arm hacked off – evidence of the way these peaceful animals are cut down with machetes.

There is nothing new about the hunting of orangutans in Borneo, even though the apes are one of the world's most endangered species and, nominally, are protected by law. Just as with the illegal torching of forest land to make way for plantations and other commercial enterprises, there is a wide gulf between what is said in Jakarta and what is practiced in the countryside. The difference now is that the poachers no longer have to track their victims deep into the forests.

With their habitat destroyed by fire or threatened by choking smoke, apes have been forced to forage for food in plantations or on the fringes of villages. "Normally, orangutans would never go anywhere near a village," says Willie Smits, director of the Wanariset center. "But they are facing a food crisis. There is little fruit." Feeble and tired, and with nowhere to hide, the apes fall easy prey to the poachers. Others are killed by villagers or plantation workers simply protecting crops. A few are taken for food.

A baby orangutan will sell for about US\$50 in Samarinda, East Kalimantan. In Jakarta, where a sizable black market in the trade exists, it can fetch US\$300. The price jumps to US\$5,000 in Taiwan, which is the usual destination. "It is a status symbol to have a pet orangutan there," says Barita Manullang, a Jakarta-based official with the World Wide Fund for Nature. A baby orangutan smuggled into the U.S. could go for up to US\$25,000.

Just how many have perished as a result of the fires is not known. Smits puts the figure at about 140, based solely on the number of orphans he has handled. But he fears the true toll could be much higher. "We cannot check for victims everywhere," he says. He knows of no orangutans dying in the flames, though he believes this may have happened.

The red apes, as they are known, once roamed over large areas of Southeast Asia. But now, according to a World Wide Fund for Nature report, they live on only 2% of their pre-World War II range – exclusively on Borneo and Sumatra. Their population has declined by up to 50% over the past decade and is thought to be below 20,000. The 5,000 or so on Sumatra are concentrated in the Leuser Mountain National Park, in the north of the island. They have not been affected by the forest fires,

which have occurred further south.

Killing mother apes to capture the young is dealing a hammer blow to a species that reproduces slowly. It takes 10 years or more for females to start breeding, and they give birth only every eight or nine years in a normal lifespan of 40 years. Says Mark Leighton, a Harvard University lecturer and rain-forest ecologist who conducts research in southwest Borneo: "A loss rate of 1% per year – which means killing just one female out of 100 – changes the population from being relatively stable to declining."

But the orangutan is threatened by more than poachers. The endless whittling-away of its habitat by plantation owners and timber barons has left many of them isolated in fragments of forest too small to support their numbers. This, plus the attendant gene-sapping effects of inbreeding, points to a further reduction in the population. And worse may be to come. Says Herman Rijksen, an Indonesian-based expert on orangutans: "If you overlay these areas with a map of planned forest conversion and timber concessions, it makes you weep. There is a 100% overlap. We need a very large structural change to protect these animals. Otherwise they're gone."

Particularly at risk are about 1,000 orangutans that once lived in what was a peat swamp area in central Kalimantan. Many have been scattered by a plan commissioned in 1995 by President Suharto to convert the 10,000-square-kilometer area into Indonesia's rice bowl. The cruel twist here is that many agricultural experts believe the rice project will not work. They argue that converting peat swamps to sustainable agricultural use is difficult. The Center for Forestry Research in Bogor, near Jakarta, says that in many cases the best long-term use might be some form of forestry. With the right safeguards, would this provide a sanctuary for Borneo's endangered apes?

The reportage was published in Asiaweek (www.asiaweek.com), 28 November 1997.