



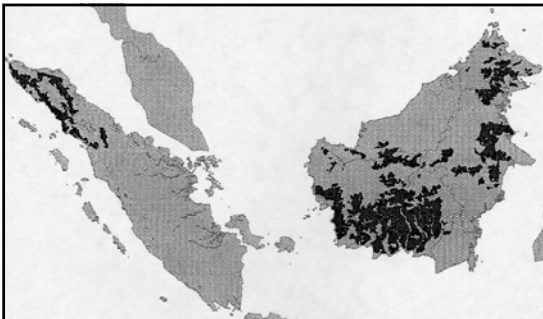
THE ORANGUTAN

Species Information

A million years ago, orangutans lived throughout much of Southeast Asia, from Java in the south, up into Laos, and southern China. In 1900, there were approximately 315,000 orangutans. Today only a few biologically viable populations remain. Asia's only great ape, the orangutan has recently been re-classified as belonging to two distinct species, reflecting their geographical distribution: *Pongo pygmaeus* (on Borneo) and *Pongo abelii* (on Sumatra). The two species show slightly different physical characteristics. Sumatran orangutans have a narrower face and longer beard than the Bornean species. Bornean orangutans are slightly darker in colour and the males have wider cheek pads than their Sumatran relatives. Behavioural differences have also been observed between the two species; Sumatran orangutans are more frugivorous (fruit-eating) and have exhibited tool use. Under the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List, the Sumatran orangutan is classified as critically endangered and the Bornean as endangered.

Habitat

Orangutans are the largest arboreal mammal in the world. The preferred habitat of the orangutan is low-lying peat swamp forest – they are rarely found in habitats over an altitude of 800m. Although they are found on both Borneo & Sumatra, their ranges are very limited, as shown in the distribution map below:



Distribution map of orangutans

Diet

Primarily frugivorous, orangutans have an important role as seed dispersers. They selectively choose ripe fruit whose seeds are adapted to withstand passage through the orangutans' gut. Once excreted, the seeds find themselves in their own little compost pile, which helps them to become established. Over 400 food types have been documented as part of the orangutans' diet, and although it consists mainly of fruit, in times of scarcity orangutans will shift their eating habits to lower quality food, such as bark, leaves & termites, rather than travel to a different area. As well as acting as seed dispersers, orangutans help to open up the forest canopy. This allows light to reach the forest floor, which helps the forest regenerate naturally. They are a vital cog in the workings of the rainforest ecosystem.



Adult male orangutan

Behaviour

Orangutans are wholly dependent on trees for their existence. They are perfectly adapted to life in the forest - they sleep in nests, feed predominantly on fruit and travel with ease through the forest canopy, rarely descending to the forest floor.

Orangutans are almost unique amongst primate species. All other apes and monkeys are social and gregarious, whilst the orangutan is semi solitary — the largest group being a mother and two offspring. Females may spend up to 25% of their time with other orangutans. In contrast, male orangutans will spend less than 9% of their time in association with other orangutans. Sumatran orangutans are more social and this social behaviour usually coincides with the simultaneous fruiting of the fig tree, which doesn't occur in Borneo.

Courtship lasts between 3-10 days and it is the female who, not wanting to share her food source, initiates the final separation. The male has no role in the raising of his offspring. It is thought that this solitary lifestyle evolved due to erratic fruiting, leading to competition for food. With a predominately frugivorous diet, containing relatively few calories for such a large body size, the orangutan needs to forage for 60% of the day, with the other 40% spent sleeping and resting.

Orangutans are the slowest breeding of all primates and, at eight years, have the longest inter-birth interval of any land-based mammal. A female orangutan will normally have her first infant between the ages of 12 and 15. Offspring are dependent on their mothers for at least five years and with a life expectancy of 45 years plus, females will normally have no more than three offspring. With these factors combined, the orangutan population, especially small fragmented populations, are at considerable risk. They don't have the capacity to recover from disasters that may strike a population. A slight rise in the adult female mortality rate by just 1-2% can drive a local population to extinction.