



ORANGUTAN REHABILITATION

What is orangutan rehabilitation really about?

Essentially it is the process through which once-captive orangutans are returned to the wild. It involves c o n f i s c a t i o n , quarantine, veterinary care, and a supervised release. Frequently it involves hand-rearing; always it is a long-term undertaking. The underlying rationale is a combination of animal welfare and conservation: improving the welfare of the individual while enabling law enforcement agencies to do their job. The Orangutan Foundation also believes that, because release sites need to be large and secure, rehabilitation can support habitat protection efforts.



If rehabilitated orangutans are supposed to be returned to the wild, why are they fed everyday?

The daily provisioning of ex-captive orangutans serves three purposes: it allows people to monitor the orangutans (sometimes the only time they are seen is at feeding); in times of poor natural food availability, the food offered decreases the chance of competition between wild and rehabilitated orangutans; and finally the amount given is only a supplement thereby ensuring the orangutans stay healthy while still having to search in the forest for their own food. It must be remembered that, while the feedings do provide the best opportunity for short-term visitors to see these elusive apes in their natural environment, they are run for the orangutans not people.

Why does the Foundation no longer release orangutans into Tanjung Puting? Tanjung Puting is already offered some protection by having National Park status; the Foundation and other NGOs are active there and the wild orangutan population is estimated to be around 5,000. There is no conservation benefit derived from continuing rehabilitation in the park. This is the view shared by most orangutan experts.

So what does the Foundation do now? In the late 1990's after it was agreed and signed into law that orangutans should not be released into areas such as Tanjung Puting National Park, the Foundation successfully lobbied the Indonesian government to have a conservation area created in an expired logging concession to the west of Tanjung Puting. Without the Foundation's efforts the 76,110 ha Lamandau Nature Reserve would have been converted into a palm oil plantation. Now it is a Government designated orangutan release site but, in accordance with accepted guidelines, not open to visitors.

More than 160 orangutans have been released into Lamandau. Following construction of Camp Buluh and Camp Perapat in 2006, Orangutan Foundation now has six release camps at the Reserve. Here, juvenile orangutans are accommodated in large cages within the forest during the final stages of the rehabilitation process. A half-way house offers many benefits: it enables the orangutans to choose exactly when they want to leave human care plus growing up in the forest in which they will continue to live mimics what occurs naturally in their mothers' home range. Equally importantly, the increased number of release camps will increase the Foundation's presence on the ground and so contribute to keeping the forests safe.

Somalia's story demonstrates how the Foundation makes rehabilitation work. Somalia was found severely dehydrated, covered in scabies and starving (see image top left). No one thought he would survive. After months of intensive (and often) 24-hour care, he pulled through. Then, under the watchful eyes of his carers, he began the process of learning how to live in the wild, initially in the 'nursery forest' adjacent to the Foundation's Care Centre and Quarantine facility. When he was old enough, Somalia was released at Lamandau, a happy, healthy orangutan, back in the forest (see image below). No one can deny that the Care Centre saved his life and, if there were not orphans like Somalia, there would be no Lamandau Nature Reserve.

What do the critics say?

Critics of the rehabilitation process claim that money would be better spent on conservation; arguing rehabilitation is overly sentimental, not scientific and detracts from the real issue, which is saving wild orangutan populations. The Foundation responds by agreeing that the wild population has to be protected; we work hard to achieve that. But the number of illegally held orangutans in Indonesia is an unavoidable issue. It has to be tackled. No one would deny that rehabilitation is expensive. Long-term care, veterinary treatment, and following the agreed guidelines on rehabilitation all come at a price. However, we conscientiously maintain the link between rehabilitation and habitat protection. For us, the process must achieve both conservation and welfare goals.



Ultimately all orangutan conservation, including rehabilitation, depends on having safe, secure habitat. That's what the Orangutan Foundation aims to provide.