

## Threats to Orangutans

Orangutan populations at the beginning of the 20th century numbered in the hundreds of thousands. During the last century the escalation of large-scale logging and the development of estate plantations on Borneo and Sumatra contributed significantly to a reduction in their habitat and population. Such activities involved clear-cutting of large tracts of complex forest ecosystems as well as fragmenting other areas by the construction of logging and access roads.

Current estimates are that orangutans have lost 80% of their forest habitat during the last 20 years. Approximately 54,700 orangutans are found in scattered populations on the island of Borneo and only 6,700 remain in a dozen habitat units in North Sumatra (Orangutan Workshop, Brookfield Zoo, October 2007). While protected by law, it is now estimated that 4-5,000 orangutans are lost each year due to the composite effect of habitat loss, the illegal killing of orangutans, and the illicit trade of infants as exotic pets. At this rate of loss of habitat and animals, the species may very well face extinction in the next 10 to 20 years.

Current threats to the orangutan and its habitat include:

### Palm oil plantations

The dramatic increase in the number of unsustainable palm oil plantations represent the most significant threat to orangutan survival today. The nature of the palm oil enterprises on Borneo and Sumatra impacts orangutans in many ways. First, orangutan forest habitat is clear cut and irretrievably lost to make way for the plantation. Fires are frequently set (illegally) to quickly clear the land of wood debris and to provide fertilizing ash. Such fires have a devastating effect on nearby wildlife as well as human health. Finally, orangutans then are killed as pests when they forage in newly planted or mature palm oil plantations.

Indonesia and Malaysia are the two largest producers of palm oil and palm kernel. To supply an ever increasing demand of this most versatile vegetable oil (it is used in everything from toothpaste, peanut butter, cereal, cosmetics, crayons, candle, snack food and can be used as bio-diesel), millions of hectares of forest have been cleared and planted for estate plantations. According to the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), since the 1970s, the area planted with oil palm in Indonesia has grown over 30-fold to over 3 million hectares. In Malaysia, the area devoted to oil palm has increased 12-fold to 3.5 million hectares. Plans are to increase palm oil production throughout Indonesia and Malaysia, particularly in regions that are biologically sensitive or bio-diverse. One controversial scheme under consideration by the Indonesian government is to convert nearly 2 million hectares (half the size of Holland) of pristine forest along the border of Sarawak and Indonesian Borneo to palm oil. Studies conducted by scientific organizations such as Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) suggest that sample sites in the "Heart of Borneo" are not suitable for palm oil plantations. However, hundreds of millions of dollars in promised investment from China and a need for the government to create jobs has kept this plan under serious consideration by the national planning agency.

A number of studies and reports have documented the threat palm oil plantations pose to orangutans, other wildlife, environment, and human health including:

[http://www.cspinet.org/new/pdf/palm\\_oil\\_final\\_5-27-05.pdf](http://www.cspinet.org/new/pdf/palm_oil_final_5-27-05.pdf)

[http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/oil\\_for\\_ape\\_summary.pdf](http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/oil_for_ape_summary.pdf)

[http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/oil\\_for\\_ape\\_full.pdf](http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/oil_for_ape_full.pdf)

[http://www.unep-wcmc.org/resources/PDFs/LastStand/orangutanreport\\_23to30.pdf](http://www.unep-wcmc.org/resources/PDFs/LastStand/orangutanreport_23to30.pdf)

One recent report shows disturbing practices by palm oil workers who kill orangutans in brutal and inhumane ways ([click](#)

here to download)

Video presentation by Sky News highlights the palm oil issue.

Finally, there is an effort among palm oil producers and others to address the environmental concerns facing that industry and move future palm oil towards sustainability. What that means and how it might be accomplished is part of the discourse at the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil ([www.sustainable-palmoil.org](http://www.sustainable-palmoil.org)).

### Logging—legal and illegal

Logging remains another obvious threat. Before the expansion of palm oil, legal logging (based on government granted concessions) and illegal logging (non-permitted logging usually by rogue groups of men) were the major threat to orangutan survival. The international demand for hardwood fueled the growth in the sawed wood and plywood industry over the past 30 years. During the past decade, particularly after the fall of President Soeharto, the rise in illegal logging operations in and around protected forests, including most national parks, as well as within forest concessions became rampant. Sawmill operators frequently purchase and process woods from both legal and illegal sources such that over 70% of exported wood products are estimated to be from illegal wood sources. The sheer amount of logging in Indonesia is simply unsustainable. Such logging practices not only indiscriminately removes the trees that orangutans depend upon, it also threatens the existence of thousands of other plants, birds, mammals and insects. Finally, its unsustainability threatens the livelihood for future generations of people and animals who depend on the forest for their survival.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has made the elimination of illegal logging one of his top environmental priorities. Not only does illegal logging degrade orangutan and other wildlife habitat, it robs the nation of billions of dollars in revenue and efforts to create a sustainable forestry for future generations. Illegal logging and its impacts are discussed in the UNEP Report " Last Stand of the Orangutan."

### Illegal gold mining

In Indonesia, mining operations have contributed 10% of the total environmental damage to the nation's forests. The open pit method of gold mining turns lush rain forest into a barren and lifeless desert, where nothing can ever grow again. Indonesian law No. 41 of 1999 prohibits such mining in preserved forest areas through 90% of such open pit mines are located in protected areas.

In addition to causing the loss of forest area, soil erosion and runoff from mining has caused normally transparent, blackwater rivers to run opaque brown. Additionally, mercury used in the mining process to amalgamate the gold also enters river systems, killing fish and other wildlife.

### Hunting

Hunting and the use of orangutans as a food source has certainly been a factor in the past and to a degree still is. The slow moving orangutan makes a very easy target for hunters. Traditional hunting by indigenous people has been responsible for a number of local extinctions. Today in Sarawak orangutans are found mainly in areas where the Iban have a taboo against the killing of orangutans. Orangutans are killed or injured by plantation owners (see above) and farmers who consider orangutans to be pests. There have been occasional reports from Aceh suggesting elements of the military have hunted orangutan for sport during the recent separatist conflict.

## Illegal Pet Trade.

It has been illegal to own orangutans as pets in both Malaysia and Indonesia for many decades. Nevertheless, orangutan infants are surreptitiously ushered into the illicit wildlife trade as a consequence of the above mentioned activities. In the course of removing trees, orangutans are occasionally located by field workers. These are frequently adult females with dependent young. Isolated by habitat fragmentation, terrified animals have no place to go except to the ground. Inevitably, the adult female orangutan is brutally killed by ignorant, desperate, or greedy field personnel to obtain her infant for sale to a wildlife trafficker.

Most infants do not survive the harsh journey to market in Jakarta, Bali or other international locations due to poor care, disease, injury, and psychological trauma. For every orphan that reaches market, it is estimated some 6-8 orangutans died as a consequence of the inhumane means of capture, transport, and care. The impact of this trade is discussed in the UNEP Report "Last Stand of the Orangutan."

## Forest Fires

The forest fires of 1997 and 1998 caused terrible destruction to the forests of Borneo and Sumatra and killed, orphaned and displaced hundreds of orangutans. Under normal circumstances the moisture contained within primary rainforest controls the fires of traditional slash and burn agriculture.

However, the forests were left with the dry debris from logging; palm oil companies increased the risks by using fire to clear land; and the presence of El Nino resulted in a longer than normal dry season. Combined, these factors caused the fire to take a devastating hold on the forests of Indonesia. More information is provided in the UNEP Report "Last Stand of the Orangutan."