

Orangutans of Indonesia



Cornell University Southeast Asia Program

Orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*)

Orangutans (Malay, *people of the forest*) are large apes who live on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra in Indonesia. Of all the great apes, they are the most like humans in behavior.



What does an orangutan look like?

- ✓ A large, bulky body, a thick neck, very long, strong arms, short, bowed legs, and no tail
- ✓ Long, reddish hair
- ✓ A large head with a prominent mouth area.
- ✓ Adult males have large cheek flaps (which get larger as the ape ages)



Males vs. Females

- ✿ Male orangutans weigh 110 to 198 pounds (50 to 90 kilograms) and are about 3.5 feet tall (100 centimeters).
- ✿ Female orangutans are half the size of males, weighing 66 to 110 pounds (30 to 50 kilograms) and are about 30 inches (76 centimeters) tall.
- ✿ Even though male orangutans are only about 3.5 feet tall, they have arms twice that length!

Males and Females Live Apart

- ✿ Male orangutans generally live alone.
- ✿ Unlike other apes, they do not socialize or live in large groups.
- ✿ Natives of Borneo claim the only time they see two orangutans together are mothers with young.
- ✿ Mothers raise the young on their own.
- ✿ They sleep in nests in the trees, usually a new one every night. ([LINK](#))

Orangutan Culture

In an article in the Jan. 3, 2003, *Science*, scientists presented evidence for cultural transmission of 24 behaviors. These include:

- ✿ using leaves as protective gloves or napkins
- ✿ using sticks to poke into tree holes to obtain insects, to extract seeds from fruit or to scratch body parts
- ✿ using leafy branches to swat insects or gather water
- ✿ "snag-riding," the orangutan equivalent of a sport in which the animals ride falling dead trees, grabbing vegetation before the tree hits the ground
- ✿ emitting sounds such as "raspberries," or "kiss-squeaks," in which leaves or hands are used to amplify the sound [LINK](#)
- ✿ building sun covers for nests or, during rain, bunk nests above the nests used for resting

Lone Rangers

- ✿ Most orangutans have a limited range.
- ✿ Sometimes, mothers and babies will meet if their range overlaps with that of others.
- ✿ If males overlap, they roar to scare each other off. This roar is also a mating call.
- ✿ Unlike other primates, orangutans are not always looking for food. They stay in the same place for long periods of time. ([link](#))

Baby Orangutans

- ✿ By mammalian standards, orangutans have a long childhood.
- ✿ They stay with their mothers 4-8 years.
- ✿ Much of the time, they are literally attached to their mothers, clinging with their strong arms and prehensile toes.
- ✿ When newly born, they cling to the front, but move around to the back later so they can see better.



Problems

- ✿ Orangutans, because of their solitary nature, need a lot of space.
- ✿ They are arboreal, which means they live mostly in trees. They swing from tree to tree and prefer not to cross land on the ground.
- ✿ They eat fruit, insects, and eggs, all food they can find in the trees.

Historically, Orangutans were once all over Asia.

Fossil evidence suggests that orangutan distribution once extended throughout Southeast Asia to Southern China. In more recent historical times however, populations have been restricted to pockets of forest on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra. The main factors attributed to this dramatic decline are climate change and hunting by humans. In more recent years, however, competition with humans for the forest resource is largely responsible for the shrinking population.





Life in the Rainforests of Borneo and Sumatra

One reason orangutans have remained in Borneo and Sumatra is that, until quite recently, there was little human economic development in these rainforests. The land-intensive, forest-dependent life of the orangutan was not a problem. This situation is changing fast.

Prime orangutan habitat has declined by 80 percent in the last 20 years, and less than two percent of original habitat is protected. Large reserves and strictly enforced wildlife protection laws are needed to keep orangutans safe from extinction.

Declining Populations

- ✿ In 1900, there were approximately 315,000 orangutans in Indonesia.
- ✿ Today, less than 50,000 are thought to remain in the wild. These are split into small, fragmented populations of which not all are biologically viable (have a long term chance of survival).
- ✿ In 2002, a previously unknown colony of orangutans was discovered in East Kalimantan, comprising nearly 10% of all those remaining.

Disturbing the Ecosystem



New Threats

Illegal Logging

- * Illegal logging is the most obvious threat. This takes many forms and differs in the regions involved, but the effects remain the same. Logging removes the trees that orangutans depend on, threatening the existence of these great apes, along with thousands of other plants, birds, mammals and insects.

Palm Oil Plantations

- * The global demand for palm oil is expected to increase by 50% in the next ten years. Indonesia, the second largest producer of palm oil after Malaysia, had converted 3 million hectares of forest (7.5 million acres, equivalent to five times the size of Bali) to plantations by 1999 and this conversion continues at a rate of 250,000 hectares per year.

Illegal Gold Mining

- * In Indonesia, mining operations alone have contributed 10% of the total damage to the country's forests. The open cast mining practiced in gold mining turns the lush rainforest into a barren and lifeless desert where nothing can ever grow again. Mercury used in the mining process also enters river systems, killing fish & other wildlife.

Hunting

- * Hunting and the use of orangutans as a food source has certainly been a factor in the declining population. 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.

Forest Fires

- * 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; an ordinary dry season can now be devastating.

Focus: Palm Oil

- ✿ Palm oil production is expected to increase dramatically in coming years.
- ✿ Both food and non-food uses.
- ✿ The non-edible uses of palm oil and palm kernel oil are of great economic value, especially in the manufacture of soaps, in biodegradable detergents, and in oleochemical products such as fatty acids, fatty esters, fatty alcohol, fatty nitrogen compounds and glycerol.
- ✿ Recent studies have explored the potential uses of fatty alcohol as fuel, which would promote enormous new possibilities for the use of palm oil. (biofuels)

Plantations replace rainforests, but orangutans can't live on plantations.



Endangered species

- ✿ One-fourth of the world's 625 primate species and subspecies could be extinct within 20 years, according to a recent report by the Primate Specialist Group of IUCN-The World Conservation Union's Species Survival Commission and the International Primatological Society, in collaboration with Conservation International.

The Human Element



- ✿ Humans have done great damage to orangutans. But there are efforts underway to lessen the damage. At one orphanage in Indonesia, trainers help young orangutans to grow and teach them jungle survival skills.

✿ Orangutan school

What Can I Do?

- ✿ Tell your friends about the dangers orangutans face
- ✿ Avoid buying products which contribute to deforestation
- ✿ Support limits on logging and slash-and-burn agriculture
- ✿ Donate to the World Wildlife Fund or the Orangutan Conservancy

The End



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