

# Work to Conserve Orang-utans

By WWF-Malaysia



Picture courtesy of ©WWF-Malaysia/Stephen Hogg (www.org.my)

At one time, orang-utans were found throughout South East Asia and covered Southern China all the way to Vietnam, Thailand and Java. Today, they are found only on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra and are listed as an endangered species due to the belief that the overall numbers of wild orang-utans has reduced by a shocking 50% over a period of three orang-utan generations (the last century).

In Malaysia the population of wild orang-utan is about 13,000 with about 2,000 individuals in Sarawak's protected areas of Lanjak-Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary and Batang Ai National Park. In Sabah they are found mainly in timber production forests on the east coast in lowland areas and mostly outside protected areas in forest patches.

So what makes the orang-utan so unique? Why should we be concerned about its future and survival?

For one, the orang-utan is Asia's only great ape and we as the only species which is changing the entire globe to our need and wants, and as Malaysian's, are guardians for this unique tree-dwelling, nest-building, water-fearing red ape.

The orang-utan has the distinction of being the largest tree dwelling mammal and is the only member of the ape family that is under normal circumstances strictly a tree-dweller. They build nests made up of twigs and small branches every night on trees to bed down on. Rarely would they come down to the ground as they feel vulnerable. This red ape is also fearful of water bodies and will avoid crossing over rivers.

They are probably the most intelligent living animal species. They love to fiddle with things and work out details by patient observation and trial and error. They are also very strong considering their size and muscular development. With a combination of intelligence, patience and strength, they can often find ways to escape from cages.

But perhaps, we identify with them strongly because like human babies, orang-utan young are also extremely dependent on their mother. They have the longest childhood dependences of up to six years because there is so much they have to learn from their mothers in order to survive in the wild.

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This is also why the orang-utan reproduction rate is very slow as much time has to be invested in “educating” one young at a time. It is thought that an average wild female orang-utan successfully bears only about three young during her lifetime, even under optimum circumstances. This means that any kind of pressure (such as loss of habitat) will result in a further slowdown of their natural breeding rate or raises their death rate and has an enormous impact on the survival of the population.

Which is why, today the orang-utan are threatened with extinction primarily because they are losing their habitat (lowland forest and swamps) as their forest are converted for agricultural use which in Sabah is predominantly for oil palm expansion.

Unfortunately, orang-utans cannot live in plantations because there is not enough food for them in any kind of plantation, whether that is oil palm, rubber, timber or some other crop.

Whenever forests that are home to wild orang-utans are cleared and converted to plantations, these mammals can no longer survive. Some individuals might move to surrounding forest, some might die and others may be rescued and brought to rehabilitation centres.

However, loss of orang-utan habitats due to such actions can be reduced if plantations retain or restore forest connections and if necessary they could actively convert selected areas of plantation land back to natural tree cover.

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WWF-Malaysia works with oil palm plantations by advocating that they join and support the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) which has clear principles and criteria to ensure that its members manage their plantations in an environmentally friendly manner. For example, members of the RSPO, which is an international, multi-stakeholder organisation, must agree not to be involved in conversion of forests with high conservation value (such as forests containing orang-utans) into oil palm plantations starting from November, 2005.

So, what can you do to help the orang-utan?

WWF-Malaysia believes that everyone – from the man on the street to multi-national companies – and of course, governments, have their own role to play.

Legislators are powerful forces and can be used to make things better for the environment and thus the orang-utan. Readers can write to their Member of Parliament (MP) asking them their position on the issue. All our MPs addresses and contact details are available at [http://www.parlimen.gov.my/DewRakyat\\_AhliDewan.php](http://www.parlimen.gov.my/DewRakyat_AhliDewan.php)

You can also voice an opinion that the oil palm plantation companies and government should be working to link isolated forests together so that the orang-utan have a better genetic chance to survive and thrive.

Readers can contribute to the implementation of more sustainable practices in the agricultural industry. Say you own shares in a plantation company, then you can influence that company's practices by questioning whether or not they or their subsidiaries carry out sustainable practices such as those identified by the RSPO.

If you own shares or are a major customer of a bank you can ask the bank what are their policies on funding non-sustainable plantation companies. If the answers are negative or not forthcoming then you as a relevant stakeholder can make a moral decision to move your business away.

At the least, you can be part of a process to force companies and banks to increase their awareness of the status of orang-utans and to make better decisions in the future in favour of orang-utan conservation.

But most of all, you can help by taking an interest in the issue. And you have by reading this article.

For more information; please visit our site at [wwf.org.my](http://wwf.org.my).



### **Come to the "Tea for Trees" event and support orang-utan conservation efforts.**

"Tea for Trees" is an event organised by BOH Plantations and WWF-Malaysia (World Wide Fund for Nature-Malaysia). During Malaysia's Environment Week on 27th & 28th October you will have the opportunity to buy a special pack of BOH tea with limited edition mug – and support WWF-Malaysia's efforts to rehabilitate degraded forest through tree-planting!

Sales proceeds will be channelled towards nurturing seedlings and replanting efforts in Sabah's Kinabatangan area, home of the iconic and endangered orang-utan.

You can buy your special pack and enjoy the tea at home. Alternatively, have your tea at the café, and then take back your mug after your visit. For details, visit [wwf.org.my](http://wwf.org.my). Hope to see you then! YL