

Orangutans struggle to survive as palm oil booms

October 22 2009, by Beh Lih Yi



An elderly orangutan is pictured eating a coconut at a sanctuary in Bukit Merah lake town in the northern Malaysian state of Perak. There are about 50,000 to 60,000 orangutans left in the wild, 80 percent of them in Indonesia and the rest in Malaysia's Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak.

Cinta, a baby orangutan found lost and alone in a vast Borneo palm oil plantation, now clings to a tree at a sanctuary for the great apes, staring intently at dozens of tourists.

She is one of the casualties of the boom in [palm oil](#) -- used extensively for biofuel and processed food like margarine -- which has seen swathes of jungle felled in Borneo, an island split between Malaysia and Indonesia.

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A 2007 assessment by the United Nations Environment Program warned the charismatic red-haired apes will be virtually eliminated in the wild within two decades if current deforestation trends continue.

Stung by criticism of its environmental record, Malaysian palm oil industry officials pledged at a conference earlier this month to fund the establishment of wildlife corridors that experts say could help save the species.

"The major issue we face with orangutans today is what we called the fragmented population," said Marc Ancrenaz from the environmental group Hutan.

"True enough there are 11,000 orangutans in (Sabah) but they are split up in many small populations, and many of these populations are not connected any more," he told the conference near Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah.

An aerial survey carried out by Hutan and wildlife authorities in eastern Sabah last year revealed some 1,000 orangutan treetop "nests" located in 100 small patches of forest completely surrounded by palm oil plantations.

Isolated from each other, the tiny communities are at risk of [inbreeding](#) and also of simply becoming lost in the vastness of the plantations -- just like three-year-old Cinta and the five other young apes at the Tuaran sanctuary.

After becoming separated from their mothers, they were rescued from

certain death and sent to the forested reserve, situated near a string of luxury beachside resorts north of Kota Kinabalu.

As well as destroying their jungle habitat, the expansion of palm oil, which now covers nearly one fifth of Sabah alone, poses other risks to the endangered species.

Orangutans that damage the palm oil fruits can be hunted down and killed, and it is quite common for young apes to be captured and kept as pets by villagers living alongside the plantations.

"They either go into the oil palm, and start eating the oil palm fruits, or get pushed into a smaller and smaller area," said Eric Meijaard from the Indonesia-based People and Nature Consulting International.

"What quite often happens is that the oil palm concession basically will ask for these orangutans to be shot so they get rid of the problem."

Malaysia is the world's second-largest exporter of palm oil after Indonesia, and the industry is the country's third largest export earner, raking in 65.2 billion ringgit (19 billion dollars) last year.

Elements in the industry have accused Western lobby groups of trying to smear palm oil in order to boost rival products from developed countries.

Bernard Dompok, the plantation industry and commodities minister, appeared at the conference to completely reject claims that palm oil is responsible for deforestation and the displacement of endangered species.

"I wish to stress that all these allegations are unjustified," he said, insisting Malaysia has taken a comprehensive approach to balance

conservation with the development of palm oil.

Representatives from the top industry body, the Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC), said they should not be held accountable for the dwindling orangutan population.

Its chief executive officer Yusof Basiron said that if the world stopped using palm oil, biodiversity would suffer further because substitutes like rapeseed and soyabean would require more land to be cleared.

"We can take some of the blame but not all of it," he said.

Sabah Wildlife Department director Laurentius Ambu said that wildlife corridors, which would enable orangutans to move across the landscape, are vital if the apes are to co-exist with palm oil.

"There is an urgent need to reconnect all forests through corridors... and to reconnect [orangutan](#) populations that are isolated by palm oil fields," he said.

The MPOC pledged to help to fund the corridors, but as there is no binding commitment, and no clarity on how the ambitious project would be funded overall, many environmentalists are sceptical.

Ancrenaz said there is no way to stop the spread of palm oil, which environmentalists say is found in one in 10 products on supermarket shelves, including bread, crisps and cereals as well as lipstick and soap.

"Oil palm is here to stay. There is no point in fighting against development, but we also want orangutans to stay," he said.

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