

What's in a name? Tracing the origins of orangutan scientific names

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A team of scientists have undertaken detective work to trace the origin of the first orangutan specimen to be scientifically named *Pongo pygmaeus*. By tracing the history of the specimen as accurately as they can, the team have established Banjarmasin, in the Indonesian part of Borneo, as the most likely place of origin. Their findings are published in the *Journal of Natural History*.

Genetic evidence has suggested that there are two species of [orangutan](#), the Bornean *Pongo pygmaeus*, and the Sumatran *Pongo abelii*, and corroborates evidence from skulls and teeth that there are at least three Bornean orangutan subspecies.

Unfortunately, the scientific names currently used for these subspecies are suspect, as are their presently defined geographic distributions and, given [18th century](#) colonial rivalries, it was not even certain that the name *Pongo pygmaeus* belongs to the Bornean species.

Three Australian and British researchers therefore set out to try to establish the origins of the specimens on which the contending orangutan scientific names are based. The investigation was not straightforward, as the original specimen dates from the 18th century, when records were sporadic, and pirates proved to be a deterrent to early 19th century exploration of north Borneo.

From these findings, the authors have established Banjarmasin, in the Kalimantan area of Borneo, as the most likely place of origin of the

orangutan specimen in the British Museum's founding collection, which gave science the name *Pongo pygmaeus*. The specimen was destroyed in about 1850, but its skull may survive in a Swedish collection. This is good news as it avoids the upheaval of having to transfer the name *Pongo pygmaeus* to the Sumatran orangutan species.

The researchers discover that the name currently used for the south Bornean subspecies actually belongs to the west Bornean subspecies, recommending for this subspecies one of its senior synonyms they have identified. Regrettably, this may leave the south Bornean [subspecies](#) nameless. Assigning the correct scientific name is vital, as it forestalls the nomenclatural instability caused if later research reveals that names have been wrongly applied.

More information: Douglas Brandon-Jones et al. The type specimens and type localities of the orangutans, genus Lacépède, 1799 (Primates: Hominidae), *Journal of Natural History* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/00222933.2016.1190414](#)

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