

Orangutan diplomacy: Why Malaysia's scheme is attracting criticism before it starts

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Malaysia plans to gift orangutans to major economic [partners](#), as a way of improving its international image and building alliances. The ["orangutan diplomacy"](#) plan was confirmed by the nation's plantation and commodities minister, Johari Abdul Ghani, at a biodiversity conference in early May.

Malaysia made the controversial announcement days after the European Union, one of Malaysia's biggest palm oil importers, [agreed to ban](#) agricultural imports that cultivate crops on lands that were deforested after 2020. Firms wishing to export to the EU would now need to provide proof, such as satellite images, that crops were not grown in such conditions. This could hit Malaysia's palm oil industry, which has been accused of destroying the forest habitats of endangered [species](#), [including the orangutan](#).

Without adopting a comprehensive conservation plan for the animals, Malaysia risks international condemnation that it is gifting orangutans as a [reward](#) to major palm oil importers. This could undermine the program as well as the nation's image.

In Malay and Indonesian, [orangutan](#) means "[person of the forest](#)." These great apes are found only in Malaysia and Indonesia. They have reddish fur, long arms, cheek pads, and, just like China's [giant pandas](#), [opposable thumbs](#). They have [human-like intelligence](#) and have been known to employ [herbal medicine](#) to heal their wounds, [communicate](#) and use sign language.

Unfortunately, orangutan numbers are dwindling. The [WWF](#) (formerly the World Wide Fund for Nature) states that there were more than 230,000 orangutans 100 years ago. But the current population is less than half that figure, and the primates are [critically endangered](#). Undoubtedly,

poaching and the illegal animal trade are partly responsible. However, the biggest culprit appears to be [palm oil-induced deforestation](#) where swaths of forest land, which contain orangutan habitats, make way for [palm oil plantations](#).

The plan to send orangutans to major palm oil importers is already [controversial](#). Stuart Pimm, a conservation ecologist from Duke University in the US, [described](#) orangutan diplomacy as "obscene" and "repugnant," while emphasizing that unlike China's [giant pandas](#), orangutans do not have established state-of-the-art facilities and protected areas in their homeland.

Malaysia is economically dependent on palm oil. [Five percent](#) of the country's 2022 GDP came from the sector, while palm oil exports are also a major source of Malaysia's [foreign exchange earnings](#). Palm oil is a [highly versatile](#) and [cost-effective](#) commodity. It is used to make cooking oil, lipstick, shampoo, detergent, soap, cookies, chocolate and many other everyday products.

Johari concedes that his idea of Malaysia gifting orangutans to major palm oil importing nations is a [diplomatic strategy](#) to convince economic partners that Malaysia is committed to [developing](#) its economy while [preserving](#) wildlife. Malaysia also clearly wants to try and [offset](#) the bad publicity for palm oil and its industrial policy.

The history of panda diplomacy

The idea for orangutan diplomacy is [inspired](#) by the success of China's panda diplomacy project. Legend has it that panda diplomacy began during the ancient [Tang Dynasty](#) (618–907), but only took off after US president Richard and first lady Pat Nixon paid an [official visit](#) to China in February 1972.

Two months later, [Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing](#) arrived at the National Zoo in Washington DC. Within a year of their arrival, the pandas attracted more than 1.1 million visitors, and were the zoo's star attractions for years.

As a [soft power](#) tool, panda diplomacy has been designed to build alliances with other nations. The program [moved towards becoming](#) a conservation program in the early 1990s, and Beijing has sent [dozens](#) of its [bears](#) to key partners across the world.

There are three main elements that make panda diplomacy a [success](#). One, the pandas have visual appeal. Giant pandas have what experts call [kindchenschema](#), a clumsy and childlike set of characteristics that evokes empathy and sense of protection from humans.

Two, pandas are exclusively found in China. When foreign citizens see pandas as adorable, friendly and peaceful, they [associate](#) them with China exclusively.

Three, the initiative is tied to a high-profile [conservation](#) program. While people have [criticized](#) the political aspects of panda diplomacy, the conservation component has won over critics. According to International Union for Conservation of Nature, giant pandas are no longer [endangered](#), and panda diplomacy has played a [crucial role](#) in this.

Could an orangutan diplomacy program follow the same path? Orangutans have unique physical attributes and [appeal](#), but there are major points of difference.

For one, the Chinese government loans, rather than gifts, pandas to strategic allies, and did not appear to roll out panda diplomacy due to pressure from external factors. More importantly, China has worked closely with [conservation groups](#), such as the [WWF](#), to set up green

corridors for pandas, and has won accolades from conservation bodies.

In the end, Kuala Lumpur needs to be honest with itself: can orangutan diplomacy reverse the misfortunes that may befall palm oil exports from Malaysia? It's not likely.

If forest management, conservation of wildlife, and the sustainability of palm oil production are concerning trading partners like Europe, then it may best if the Malaysian government addresses these issues before contemplating its own version of animal diplomacy. As it stands, orangutan [diplomacy](#) is looking more like a public relations disaster waiting to happen.

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