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# Pongo the orang-utan

Bornean orang-utan © Michel Terrettaz / WWF-Canon

## Introduction

Scientific names: Sumatran orang-utan: *Pongo abelii*  
Bornean orang-utan: *Pongo pygmaeus*

Orang-utans once lived all the way from southern China to the foothills of the Himalayas and south to the island of Java, Indonesia. Today, the red 'man of the forest' is confined to the rapidly dwindling forests of just two islands, Sumatra and Borneo. Tragically, the animals share a preference with humans for fertile alluvial plains and lowland valleys – a habitat once rich in tropical fruits but now disappearing fast due to logging and agricultural schemes such as rice cultivation and oil palm plantations. Just 100 years ago there were probably more than 230,000 orang-utans in Borneo and Sumatra. In the last ten years alone their numbers have declined by 30-50%, and now just over 60,000 survive. If efforts to protect orang-utans are not urgently strengthened, Asia's only great ape may be lost from the wild forever within a few decades.

## Did you know?

- There are two species of orang-utan
- Sumatran orang-utans were once found throughout the island of Sumatra, Indonesia. Their numbers are thought to have halved during the 1990s. Today this Critically Endangered species numbers about 7,500 individuals, in 13 separate populations confined to just 21 blocks of forest in the north of the island.
- Only three populations still contain significant populations of at least 1,000 orang-utans, and only seven number 250 or more individuals and are considered 'viable' (capable of being self-sustaining) in the medium to long term. The habitat of six of these seven populations is being logged at a rate of 10-15 per cent each year. Unless urgent measures are taken, their numbers are expected to continue to decline rapidly.
- Bornean orang-utans are distributed patchily throughout the Indonesian state of Kalimantan and the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, on the island of Borneo. They differ from Sumatran orang-utans in having a rounder face shape and darker hair colour. Most are found in Kalimantan, where extensive areas of forest still exist, especially along the southern plain and east coast.

## Current threats & problems

Although orang-utans occur in a wide range of forest types up to 1,500m above sea level, most are found in lowland areas and prefer forests in river valleys or floodplains. However, these forests are fast disappearing.

Lowland forests of Sumatra have all but been cleared. The largest remaining orang-utan population on the island is currently threatened by a proposed road which will run through Gunung Leuser National Park, one of the species' last strongholds. Illegal logging is rampant on their island, even inside some protected areas.

Borneo still has large tracts of lowland forest; however the World Bank has predicted that if nothing is done to stop forest conversion, rampant logging, and forest fires Borneo could lose most of its lowland forest by 2010.

Huge areas continue to be cleared for rubber, oil palm, and pulp plantations and other agricultural activities. According to a 2005 report from WWF, there are about 25,000 square kilometres of oil plantations in Borneo, and the area is ever increasing. In Indonesia's Kalimantan province, 10,000 square kilometres of lowland peat swamp forest were partially cleared in the 1990s for conversion to rice fields. As on Sumatra, illegal logging is rampant, including inside some protected areas. Satellite studies show that some 56 per cent (more than 29,000 square kilometres) of protected lowland forests in Kalimantan were cut down between 1985 and 2001.

Widespread forest fires, many set deliberately to clear land for plantations, are becoming a regular disaster. Not only do fires destroy vast areas of orang-utan habitat, but thousands of these slow-moving apes are thought to have burned to death, unable to escape the flames. In some areas of Borneo and Sumatra, orang-utans are shot as pests by plantation owners or farmers.

## Hunting and illegal trade

In some areas of Borneo and Sumatra, orang-utans are still hunted for food. Despite having been legally protected in Indonesia since 1931, orang-utans are also still captured from the wild and kept in households as status symbols. They are also illegally captured for the entertainment industry. A recent report from TRAFFIC, the international wildlife monitoring network, found that trade of Borneo orang-utans on Java and Bali alone may be contributing to the loss of up to 1,000 wild

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individuals a year from Borneo. This illegal trade is being aided by logging and forest clearing, which create easy access to more remote areas.

Like other great apes, orang-utans have a slow reproductive cycle: females do not mature until about 10-15 years of age and give birth to (usually) a single infant every seven to eight years. This means that small and isolated orang-utan populations, with few adults of reproductive age, are very vulnerable as it takes a long time for populations to recover from any kind of disturbance. Because most populations are now small and dispersed, destruction of their forest habitats and hunting are rapidly driving orang-utans towards extinction in the wild.

### Focus Project: Betung Kerihun National Park, Borneo, Indonesia

Located in the heart of Borneo, the vast, rugged forests of Betung Kerihun National Park are rich in biodiversity. A mountainous region ranging from 200m to almost 2,000m above sea level, the park includes a range of vegetation types from lowland dipterocarp forest to montane tropical rainforest. It is home to thousands of plant, mammal, bird, reptile, and fish species, many of which are only found on Borneo – including the Bornean orang-utan. The park is also home to different groups of the indigenous Dayak people.

At 8,000km<sup>2</sup>, Betung Kerihun is Kalimantan’s second-largest national park and, due to its biodiversity, is one of the most important protected areas in Asia. It shares common borders with two protected areas in Sarawak: Lanjak Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary and Batan Ai National Park. These neighbouring protected areas have been proposed by the Indonesian and Malaysian governments as a trans-boundary World Heritage Site.

Although a national park, Betung Kerihun – and its orang-utans – is still threatened by illegal logging, plantation development, road construction, mining, and wildlife poaching. The local Dayak people, who live in 12 major settlements in and around the park, are poor and have limited economic and educational opportunities. Most of them practice shifting agriculture for hill-rice cultivation, but many are still dependent on forest resources. The high market demand for forest products and relatively immediate cash earnings lure many local people into illegal activities. In 2002, about 31,000 trees were illegally felled in the park and incidences of wildlife poaching and collection of forest plants were common.

WWF-Indonesia is working with the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry and the Indonesian Institute of Science to improve management of Betung Kerihun National Park. With funding from the International Tropical Timber Foundation, WWF has successfully completed a survey of the park’s flora and fauna and has developed a long-term management plan for the area.

One area of work is to strengthen park patrols in order to prevent illegal logging and protect orang-utan habitat. WWF is providing technical assistance and training for park rangers and officers and engaging local communities in patrolling activities. WWF is also working with the local government on conservation policies.

A second vital area of work is the development of sustainable livelihoods for local communities. WWF is promoting community-based economic activities with the groups living within the park territories and its buffer zone, such as agro forestry and ecotourism. The aim is that local communities

## What is WWF doing to reduce threats to orang-utans in the wild?

Orang-utans are ‘flagship’ species for the conservation of the tropical forests of Sumatra and Borneo. Because they require large areas of good quality habitat, ensuring their conservation in the wild means that the myriad of other species that share the ecosystem – including proboscis monkeys, Asian elephant, Sumatran rhinoceros, Sumatran tigers, clouded leopard, Malayan sun bear, and Malay tapirs – will be protected. Orang-utans play an important role in the ecology of the forest, helping to disperse various plant species and control outbreaks of caterpillars (a favourite food for pregnant females).

can benefit economically from having a protected area in their neighbourhood, while at the same time conserve natural habitats within the park. As part of this work, WWF is working with the local government on policy development for sustainable livelihoods.

Betung Kerihun National Park is part of the Borneo Lowland & Montane Forests Ecoregion – one of WWF’s Global 200 Ecoregions, biologically outstanding habitats where WWF concentrates its efforts.



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