Conservation of Orangutans: 
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HERMAN D. RIJKSEN

Introduction

The "red-haired man of the rainforest," or orangutan, is among the most spectac­
tacular creatures on Earth, and although representing the closest among human 
mammal relatives in Southeast Asia, he is in grave danger of extinction. Ironi­
cally also "cultivated" man is seriously endangered, but while humans choke the 
world with their biomass, aggravated by disproportional exploitation and pollu­
tion, they supplant and eradicate their closest relative as they exploit and destroy 
his habitat so as to serve so called "development." In this time of Western self­
scorn with respect of the qualitative aspects of what is commonly understood as 
"development," it may be enlightening to notice that the existence of the red­
haired man of the rainforest has been endangered whenever he happened to come 
into contact with "cultivated" man, even long before any European set a foot in 
his habitat: He has been hunted to extinction in all the regions where the earliest 
aricultural migrants from the Asian mainland settled.

When the first Europeans arrived to colonize and convert the Indomalayans to 
their technocratic civilization pattern, the orangutan's distribution range had 
shrunk already to relic populations. Confined to the upper half of Sumatra and 
some stretches of Borneo, none were to be found any more on the Asian main­
land, the Southeast Asian peninsula, Java, the southern half of Sumatra, and 
those regions in Borneo where neolithic agriculturalists had settled (i.e., near the 
mouths of the largest rivers). Drawing from the ethnic histories of the peoples of 
Sumatra, Malaysia, and Borneo, it is clear that the demise of the red-haired 
"man," in liaison with the "negrito-type" man (and the so-called "punan" ethnic 
group) has been a direct consequence of the (agri-)cultural urge for headhunt­
ing—a uniquely human form of competition. And although the introduction of 
"Western" civilization has effectively stopped headhunting of human subjects, it 
in fact boosted the eradication of (at least) the orangutan—albeit mainly in an 
indirect way, by engendering a human population explosion and overexploitation 
of its forest habitat. Nevertheless, it also came to foster some awareness for the 
sorrowful plight of man's nearest relative.

Not many people have had the privilege to see and come to know the orangu­
tan. Yet it is largely owing to the concern and the ensuing efforts of those few 
privileged individuals that world-wide measures have been taken in order to
seriously try to conserve the remaining relic populations of apes as effectively as is feasible under the adverse circumstances. Thus, in the 1940s the (then still colonial) government of Indonesia was persuaded to decree a total ban on hunting and trade in “orang utan” and/or preserved parts thereof. In addition, it set aside, after due deliberation and after the local authorities had voluntarily given their full consent, some major “reserves” in which the ape might be conserved. They comprise the Gunung Leuser/Sikundur/Langkat Utara group of wildlife reserves (currently Gunung Leuser National park; 10,000 km²), the Kotawaringin Sampit group of wildlife reserves (currently Tanjung Puting S.M.; some 350,000 ha), and the Kutai wildlife reserve (currently National Park; 306,000 ha).

The areas were uninhabited by people at the time of their establishment as reserves, and great care was taken by the government that only those areas were included where any prospect for profitable cultivation or exploitation was absent, either because of adverse soil and terrain conditions, such as in the Gunung Leuser area and Tanjung Puting, or because of excessive remoteness. At that time the reserves covered about 20% of the distribution range of the Sumatran and less than 3% of the Bornean populations of apes. Fortunately, most of its distribution range was covered by the territory of Indonesia, because British colonial rule never installed any sanctuaries in the Bornean territories. Only quite recently has the Sarawak government set aside major reserves for its unique rainforest types including the orangutan, almost reluctantly followed by the Sabah government.

In the meantime, at the instigation of B. Harrisson, a world-wide ban on orangutan trade has been enforced during the 1970s, a move that effectively curbed at least one aspect of the steady decline of apes.

Biological Aspects

The orangutan is a frugivore, although its diet comprises all sorts of vegetable produce (leaves, growthlayers, wood, and flowers) from a wide variety of rainforest flora, as well as animal protein, notably insects (e.g., ants and termites), and even mineral soil. With reference to its food requirements, the rainforest should be seen as a “patchy” habitat, with an irregular distribution, not just in space and quantities of food, but also in terms of quality and availability in time. Yet, within the vast stretches of seemingly uniform rainforest that used to cover all tropical Southeast Asia, the ape appears to inhabit mainly the alluvial plains and valleys and the adjacent slopes of surrounding hills and mountain complexes, patches where, in general, the conditions for its existence seem to be most suitable. For there the forest, as a result of regularly occurring disturbances of a minor, “adaptable” scale, cannot attain a “mature” stage and consequently supports the highest relative incidence of suitable fruit trees and lianas. The extensive, mature rainforests of the flat lowlands, dominated by Dipterocarp species, offer far less suitable conditions.

Not surprisingly, albeit rather unfortunate for the ape, humans have the same preference for such patches in the rainforest as they offer the most fertile soil, relative to their surroundings while the rivers and streams assure easy access. As a consequence, both close relatives wherever their distribution range overlap are