SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

Meat-eating Behaviour in Wild Orang Utans, *Pongo pygmaeus*

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ABSTRACT. Meat-eating was observed for the first time among a population of wild orang utans at Gunung Leuser National Park, Sumatra. An adult female who was consorting with an adult male consumed a gibbon (*Hylobates lar*) carcass. There was no food sharing between the consort pair. The absence of food sharing is interpreted as indicative of the anti-social attitude of adult orang utans.

INTRODUCTION

Orang utans, *Pongo pygmaeus*, are known to take invertebrate foods; such as honey bees, Meliponid bees, termites, ants and gall wasps (MACKNON, 1974; GALDIKAS-BRINDAMOUR & BRINDAMOUR, 1975; RIJSSEN, 1978). There has been speculation as to whether wild orang utans eat vertebrate meat (HARRISON, 1963), but up to now no such behaviour has been observed.

The observation reported here was made while studying the social behaviour of the habituated wild population in the Ketambe area of the Gunung Leuser National Park, Sumatra, Indonesia (Fig. 1). The population has been studied since 1971, initially by RIJSSEN and subsequently by SCHURMANN. For a general description of both the area and population, see RIJSSEN (1978).

OBSERVATIONS

On March 25, 1980 at 16:09 while following the adult male John who was consorting with the young adult female Sina, we saw Sina at a height of about 8 m eating an infant gibbon (*Hylobates lar*). She must have picked it up somewhere in the trees, since she did not descend to the ground to collect it. Also, because no blood was visible, the gibbon must have been already dead when she found it.

When the incident was first noticed, she was eating the head, hanging by her left arm and left leg. Using her free hand to hold the carcass, she tore small parts off with her teeth. She continued with the legs, eating downwards from the rest of the abdomen, after which she ate one arm, starting from the chest.

Initially, John sat 7 m away in an adjacent tree, looking intently at her, but made no attempt to approach her. After 62 min he moved off on leaves, about 6 m away from her, looking at her only occasionally as is usual in consort pairs.
One hour after this, Sina moved to where John had been sitting and finished eating the last arm. The gibbon was eaten completely, with no remains; this took her at least 137 min. Finally, she moved off to build her night nest. John followed and built his night nest at about 5 m from hers which again is usual in consort pairs.

DISCUSSION

Individuals of this population have been under observation for at least 10,000 hr. As meat-eating has never been observed before, this single instance indicates that it must be rare. It was obvious that hunting was not involved, since no indications whatsoever of such behaviour were noticed; moreover, arboreal orang utans seem much too sluggish to capture any fast moving prey. The sequence of eating the parts of the body was similar to that observed among chimpanzees (Teleki, 1973).

John's almost continuous staring at Sina suggests that he was very interested in the process, although he did not actually beg for meat. As judged by her uncomfortable posture, maintained for a considerable time, she was at least discouraging John to take a share of the meat from her.

Tolerated food sharing, preceded by begging does occur in orang utans, primarily in the context of mother-offspring relationships and among immature rehabilitants. In comparison with the chimpanzees, where meat is virtually always shared with other adults (Lawick-Goodall, 1971; Teleki, 1973), the absence of food sharing is remarkable. Even in baboons, where there is usually fighting over a kill rather than sharing, partners of consort pairs share meat (Strum, 1975). Therefore, it can be argued that it is the anti-social attitude of adult orang utans ultimately caused by ecological factors, which precludes the development of food sharing. This suggests that at some point in the ontogeny there is a radical shift in attitudes away from sociality. Our present work focuses on investigating this remarkable shift.