



## **Young Explorers Program**

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Sepilok Orangutan Sanctuary Project**



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## 1. Introduction



Sepilok is situated, near Sandakan in Eastern Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. The Sepilok Orangutan centre is located right on the edge of the Kabili Sepilok Reserve, where orangutans can be released to live in the wild.

Fig 1: Situation of the Sepilok centre (5° 52' 0" Latitude North, 117° 58' 0" Longitude East)

The Sumatran Orangutan species (*Pongo abelii*) is critically endangered and the Bornean Orangutan species (*Pongo pygmaeus*) is endangered according to the IUCN Red List. The species of Orangutan on Borneo is divided in three distinct populations that have been elevated to three subspecies. About 55'000 individuals are living in Borneo, only 7'000 individuals of the Sumatran species are still living in the wild.

They are being killed rapidly by the destruction of the rainforest ecosystem. A lack of education leads people to keep them as pets. Farmers often kill them if they wander onto their farms.

When the rescued Orangutans first arrive at the centre, they are often in a sorry state and riddled with diseases. They are put into cages while they're treated for their ailments and nursed back to health. The wardens then teach them how to forage for fruit, climb trees and generally fend for themselves. When they are mid-way through the rehabilitation process they are released into the surrounding forest reserve. The animals then spend most of their time in the forest but often return to one of the centers' five feeding platforms for a "free" meal.



Fig 2: Orangutans in Sepilok  
(Photo: Mike Horn SARL/Dmitri\_Sharomov)

When the wardens feel that an Orangutan is fully rehabilitated, it is caught and returns to the wild - usually deep in the forest or to one of the National Parks or Wildlife Sanctuaries. Between 150-200 orangutans are living in the park, which includes a small wild population.

## 2. Our Impression

At the Sepilok Orangutan Sanctuary, we saw a positive interaction between humans and orangutans. We saw a well-constructed sanctuary that was both natural and could be used to help the orangutans. Sepilok appeared to be a huge rainforest, although it actually is surrounded by palm oil plantations. We easily saw many orangutans and monkeys playing



around in the trees and on the feeding platforms.

The nine Young Explorers and the Mike Horn team helped to tear down one of the old feeding platforms in one of the wild areas of the park where no tourists are allowed to go.

We were amazed. Orangutans are incredible animals and we found the sanctuary to be a nice place to see them.

Fig 3: The main feeding platform in front of the visitor platform

The greatest part of the sanctuary is closed for tourists, which is positive as it allows the orangutans to live and behave naturally without human disturbances.

However, we still had the feeling that the Sepilok reserve should become less tourist-orientated and concentrate more towards the protection of the orangutans. The park appeared to be a sanctuary and a tourist attraction at the same time. We felt the project was rather profit-orientated, foreign volunteers, volunteering for 2 months, have to pay 4'500 Dollar to be allowed to work in the sanctuary. The park works with 12 volunteers at the same time. Moreover the tourists pay rather high entrance fees to the park and adoptions of orangutans. However they have a greater number of adoptions the number of orangutans they have.

### 3. Ideas for improvement

- Natural look of the park:

visitor platforms: round shapes, different heights, camouflage with leaves, bushes and maybe a tree in the middle

feeding platforms: get rid of the nails, plant ivy, or any other similar plant, to cover and camouflage, get rid of ladders and implement a pulley system (the pulley system will ensure people do not hand feed the animals)

- Increase the education of visitor: install counters with pictures and information on each orangutan around the platform. This way people will be able to identify the orangutans and get an idea how important the work at the Sepilok centre is.

Example:



Name

When was he/she born?

When did he/she come to the sanctuary?

Why did he/she come to the sanctuary?

Information signs could be installed on the ways to the viewing platforms. Possible topics are orangutans, other monkeys, the ecosystem rainforest, the biggest threats, history of the park.

Moreover name tags could be put on the trees, which contain the name of the trees and other interesting information (example: the bark of this tree is used as...).

Other ideas:

- track orangutans to show people where rehabilitated orangutans are, using a real time telemetry tracking device
- create a video room with live webcams from places visitors are not allowed to go (example: nursery)
- playground for children in front of park (a jungle gym so kids could play like orangutans, keeping them entertained)
- sustainable banana plantation which would allow independence from the local market

#### 4. Conclusion

While we volunteered in Sepilok, we wondered and deeply thought about what would be the best way to help these animals. Humans' intervention cannot be the perfect solution for nature to heal. But since the damage has mainly been caused by humans, it is our duty to act wise by helping wherever we can. Sepilok orangutan sanctuary is one of the last chances to save this species from extinction and if it would become less tourist/profit orientated and concentrate more on conservation issues, it would be a great project.

