



Illegal Loggers Threaten Orangutans in Borneo

WASHINGTON - A rise in illegal logging and poaching has put thousands of endangered orangutans at risk of extinction in Borneo, one of the last strongholds of the giant ape, said a leading U.S. anthropologist yesterday.

"At the current rate of habitat destruction, orangutans could be extinct in the wild in 10 to 20 years," said Cheryl Knott, assistant professor of anthropology at Harvard University, who has studied orangutans in Borneo's Gunung Palung National Park for more than a decade.

Orangutans, one of four kinds of great apes, are one of humans' closest relatives and share 97 percent of our DNA. They spend nearly all of their time in trees and the stripping of forests is a devastating blow to them, said Knott.

Knott said that by some estimates, more than 80 percent of all orangutan habitat had been destroyed over the past two decades and deforestation in Indonesia was escalating.

Knott, who is also a researcher for National Geographic, estimated 15,000 to 24,000 orangutans were left in the world. They live on the islands of Borneo in Indonesia and Sumatra in Malaysia. About 2,500 are in Gunung Palung Park.

In Gunung Palung, she said 300 to 500 trees that orangutans relied on for fruit and shelter had been destroyed in recent months by loggers, most of whom came from nearby villages.

Knott said orangutans were deeply traumatized by the logging, behaving erratically and eating little.

"Orangutans need the trees, they live in the trees, they travel in the trees and they feed in the trees," said Knott, adding it was too soon to say how many orangutans had died as a direct result of the logging.

BABIES STOLEN FROM SLAIN MOTHERS

Knott, who appealed for international help and more action from the Indonesian authorities, said she had tried to talk to illegal loggers herself. "But they are getting more and more brave and are not afraid of the law," she said.

In addition to the threat from illegal logging, she said female orangutans were being killed and their

babies stolen for the illegal pet trade. Orangutans were also hunted for meat.

She said her team had confiscated more than 20 orangutans snatched from the forest to be pets. Half of the pet owners turned out to be police or military officials.

A female orangutan bears young only once about every eight years and Knott said populations had trouble bouncing back when harmed by deforestation or when females were killed so their babies could be captured.

In addition, females only conceived during periods of high fruit production and the logging was affecting this.

An Indonesian national police force team had been into the park recently to try to rout out illegal loggers, but Knott said there was resistance from many local officials.

Aside from campaigning to stop logging, Knott's research has been trying to pin down orangutan "culture" - customs passed from one generation to the next.

For example, at Gunung, when a stranger approached, the orangutans made a "kiss-squeak" sound into a handful of leaves in response. This had only been seen at Gunung.

Hundreds of miles west of Borneo, in Sumatra, orangutans used sticks to pry seeds from prickly fruits, a trick that the Borneo apes have not adopted.

Story by Sue Fleming

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