

Deforestation

The disappearing habitat of jungle dwelling orangutans

Deforestation means “the action or process of clearing forests.”

Orangutans (*Pongo pygmaeus*), arboreal apes found in Borneo and Sumatra, with great shaggy reddish-brown coats, very long arms, and no tail, became designated as an endangered species in 1970. These primates, the largest in Indonesia, live in the thick jungle of these regions. Recent reports estimated that only 15,000-25,000 orangutans in total are left in Borneo and Sumatra.

The most obvious threat now facing orangutan populations in Indonesia is the loss of habitat due to logging operations and deforestation. In addition, fires produced from logging industries have created a severe ecological problem throughout the islands of Indonesia.



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Family bond: A mother orangutan with her infant.

Environmental groups in Indonesia have concentrated their investigations on the Tanjung Puting National Park on the island of Borneo, which is home to world famous centers to protect orangutans. There they found thousands of cubic meters of timber, including wood from increasingly rare species of trees, being processed at illegal sawmills within the park.

Shrinking habitat means more than simply less food and space for the red apes. It also greatly increases their exposure to poachers, whose preferred method of capturing infants to sell on the black market is to kill their mothers – a crushing blow to a species with an already fragile future. Females give birth to a single offspring every 3-6 years. A baby orangutan

grows very slowly, and although it may become somewhat independent at 3 years of age, it will stay with its mother until she gives birth again.



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Destruction: Large-scale illegal logging is occurring throughout Borneo in national parks that were once deemed free of it

“A loss rate of one percent per year – which means killing just one female out of 100 – changes the population from being relatively stable to declining,” states Dr. Mark Leighton, a Harvard professor and rain forest ecologist who conducts primate research in southwest Borneo.

As the rain forests continue to decline, the pressures remain. Many of the surviving orangutans thrive in areas of forest far too small to support the population. If the current rate of deforestation continues, the world's rain forests will vanish within 100 years-causing unknown effects on global climate and eliminating the majority of plant and animal species on the planet.

Paul Jepson, a researcher at Oxford University's School of Geography, said: "The illegal logging in Indonesia is of global significance; not only will we lose a number of endangered species through the destruction of their habitat, but the loss of the forests will also have an impact on global warming and on climate conditions not just in Indonesia, but across the world."

Through education, Monkey Jungle hopes to encourage its visitors to take part in the struggle against the mounting destruction of Indonesia's lush forests and the delicate orangutans that struggle to survive within them.