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Orangutan project offers hope in Borneo

By Ian Wood

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Ian Wood tells of a recent visit to Borneo where he found there is still hope for the Orangutan

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Despite the pressures on Indonesian rain forests, there is still hope for the long-term survival of the orangutan in parts of Borneo.

Tanjung Puting National Park in Kalimantan covers 416,000 hectares, which is roughly the size of Cornwall.

As well as over 4000 orangutans, this bio-diversity hotspot is home to 30 other mammal species, 260 types of bird and 17 different reptiles.

There is now no illegal logging taking place in the park and the network of guard posts continues to grow. Recently I visited a new one on the Buluh Besar, a remote river in the south of the park.

"This new guard post will protect a large area of the park that could otherwise be exposed to illegal activities," said Ashley Leiman (OBE), director of the Orangutan Foundation.

Anyone heading up this river is stopped, to check if they have permission to be there. The guard posts work so well because Indonesians have a culture of non-confrontation and respect for each other.

advertisement Would-be illegal loggers simply turn back, which is so much easier than evicting them after they have set up in the forest.

They are also cheap to run by western standards. Four guard posts funded by the Orangutan Foundation cost £800 per month and provide 11 local jobs.

The Aspai mine on the northwest border of the park is an example of what can happen when areas are left unprotected.

I travelled by boat for some hours, regularly seeing orangutans, proboscis monkeys, long tailed macaques and a variety of other wildlife.

Then, subtly at first I noticed the clean air of the forest had taken on a toxic quality. Shockingly, one side of the river opened up to reveal a vast desert of white sand.

At first, this illegal mine produced gold (and polluted the water with mercury, which is used to extract the gold). Now it is zircon, an element used in many applications including the steel industry.

I asked Ms Leiman what could be done. "We have concluded that we can not win the whole war in one go, but we are winning crucial battles," she replied.

"However dire this area is, it is outside of the park - the park is the other side of the river. We are concentrating our resources there, where we have the force of law behind us and where there is still standing forest."

Ultimately the future of this area lies with the people that live in it. I went to see an inspiring education project run by an Indonesian NGO in a town near to the forest.

They are visiting schools, companies and remote villages to raise awareness of the local conservation issues. Their information centre had hundreds of paper leaves hanging from the ceiling.

"We call them hope leaves," said Sally Tirtadhardja, "each child that visits is asked to write



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a thought on a leaf and add it to the collection."

She translated a few for me and they all revolved about their love of orangutans and nature in general. If this area can be protected in the short term this next generation will surely care for it in the future.

There is no doubt that the most serious threat for the long-term survival of the orangutan is palm oil. The demand for bio-fuels to help countries reduce their CO2 emissions is generating even more demand.

Indonesia already has a huge availability of suitably cleared land. However, new palm oil plants do not produce a crop for 4 years, hence companies prefer to subsidise these non-productive years by clearing forested land and selling the timber.

Ironically, taking a global view, recent analysis has shown that CO2 emissions from the conversion of peat forest swamps are far greater than the gains made from the substitution of fossil fuels with palm oil. In fact if the CO2 emissions from de-forestation are taken into account Indonesia becomes the 3rd highest contributor of CO2 after the USA and China.

There are several ways you can help the Orangutan Foundation protect orangutans and their habitat. If you would like to become a member, make a donation or adopt an orangutan please visit www.orangutan.org.uk.

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