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Sumatran orang-utan now in serious decline

By Ian Wood

Last Updated: 11:25am BST 09/07/2008

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The Sumatran orang-utan is now in such serious decline that it will take extraordinary efforts to prevent it becoming the first great ape species to become extinct.

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The warning emerges from a compilation of a major orang-utan survey in 2004 together with the latest data available on populations in its forest habitat in Sumatra and Borneo.



Orang-utans are one of humankind's closest relatives in the animal kingdom

The new analysis is based on the loss of forest land on both islands since the last survey and confirms that only about 6,500 orangu-tans remain in Sumatra.

A report to be published in Oryx, the International Journal of Conservation, estimates that the figure of 54,000 animals in Borneo may now be 10 per cent too high.

Up to date information on populations is vital for drawing up a strategy to ensure their survival.



In the last 35 years about 50,000 orang-utans are estimated to have been lost as their habitats shrank.

The research does show that there are actually more orang-utans in Borneo than previously known but that recent reductions in populations are far more severe than previously thought.

Although the situation is extremely serious the report does highlight some reasons for cautious optimism for their long-term survival.

Dr Martin Fisher, Editor of Oryx said: "The 16 authors who produced this report represent a global consensus of the world's leading orang-utan biologists."

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The minimum size for a viable orang-utan population is considered to be 250

The report finds that the relatively small population of Sumatran orang-utan is stable, ironically due to human conflict in the Aceh region which has resulted in less forest loss.

Despite the optimism expressed in the report about the current political situation, it is clear that unless urgent action is taken to protect the remaining populations, we can expect further population declines," Dr Fisher said.

Orang-utans are the only great apes found in Asia and today their distribution is restricted to Sumatra and Borneo with those on each island regarded as unique species.

They are particularly vulnerable to extinction due to their long inter-birth interval of about 7 years and are increasingly restricted to smaller forest fragments.

The minimum size for a viable population is considered to be 250 and the report highlights that there are now just 6 remaining groups of this number or more in Sumatra. In Borneo the news is better with 32 separate groups found to contain at least this amount.



Illegal logging is a great threat to local habitats

Another fact highlighted by the current data is that 75% of all orang-utans occur outside national parks where forests have been suffering from illegal logging, mining, encroachment by palm oil plantations and fires.

In many cases the report states that the appropriate authorities are either unable or reluctant to implement conservation management effectively. However there is evidence that improved protected area management can be attained.

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Recent examples from parts of Kalimantan in Indonesia, Borneo, show that illegal logging in protected areas can be effectively reduced. Key reasons for these successes are attributed to political and financial support, media attention and efforts by conservationists.

Although the lack of political will for conservation management remains a concern, there have been some signs that the approach of the Indonesian government is changing.

Anti logging measures have included the eviction of illegal settlers, the closure of transportation routes and the insertion of legally endorsed metal spikes in commercial timber trees. In addition there have also been cases where the implementation of community based forest protection units have proved effective in protecting orang-utan habitat and combating illegal hunting or trade of the species.

In Sumatra most orang-utans occur in the province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, both inside and outside of national parks. There has recently been a temporary moratorium on logging in this region, which was put in place by the first democratically elected governor of Aceh, Irwandi Yusuf. During the conflict in this area he was imprisoned, but he managed to break out when the 2004 tsunami flooded the jail killing many other inmates. Known as the "green governor" he has been a major force in putting forest conservation in Sumatra firmly on the political agenda.

The world market for carbon trading will produce large sums of money to be invested in preventing de-forestation. The international conservation group Fauna and Flora International (FFI) and the Australian company Carbon Conservation have brokered a deal that could generate up to £10m pounds a year to support projects that avoid de-forestation in Sumatra.



Estimates suggest palm oil plantations are responsible for the loss of 10 million hectares of rain forest in Malaysia and Indonesia

Irwandi Yusuf is also a driving force behind this scheme that if successful could offer a genuine chance for the survival of the Sumatran orang-utan. Mark Rose, Chief Executive of Fauna & Flora International, said: "One of the great challenges facing us is to ensure that the benefits of these investments not only conserve forests, but support the local communities that depend on them for their livelihoods. Fauna & Flora International, through its partners, is committed to ensuring that this happens."

Although limited timber extraction can in certain situations be compatible with orang-utan conservation, complete conversion of forests is not. By far the biggest threat to the forests comes from the expanding palm oil industry.

Indonesia and Malaysia are the two largest palm oil producers with a combined global market share of 80.5%. It is estimated that the development of palm oil plantations is responsible for the loss of 10 million hectares of rain forest in Malaysia and Indonesia and the industry has become vital to the economies of both countries.

As world demand for palm oil soars, the remaining forests are coming under more pressure. There are large amounts of already suitably cleared land for new oil palm plantations but it is often in the interest of companies to clear forested land instead so that they can sell the timber.

New oil palm trees do not produce a crop for 4 years and the timber sales are used to subsidise these non-productive years. In fact the profits from clearing the land can be so large that some oil palm companies don't even bother to set up the plantation.

Recently the Malaysian prime minister called for a ban on clearing permanent forest reserves to make way for new oil palm plantations, but the ultimate jurisdiction over land use remains with individual states.

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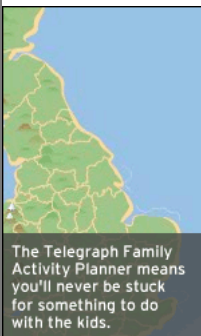
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Recent reductions in orang-utan populations are far more severe than previously

"In the last 35 years about 50,000 orang-utans are estimated to have been lost as their habitats shrank. If this continues, this majestic creature will likely face extinction by 2050. The fate of the orang-utan is a subject that goes to the heart of sustainable forests... to save the orang-utan we have to save the forest," he said.

The report by Oryx - The International Journal of Conservation, concludes with 7 recommendations to help orang-utan populations.

- 1) Effective law enforcement and prosecution to stop hunting of orang-utans for food and trade.
- 2) Mechanisms developed to mitigate and reduce human-orang-utan conflict in agricultural areas including large scale plantations.
- 3) Audits needed to assess the compliance of forestry concessions to their legal obligation to ensure orang-utans are not hunted in concession areas.
- 4) Increased environmental awareness is needed at a local level. Several NGO's are now promoting local awareness of the need for conservation with some success.
- 5) Mechanisms for monitoring orang-utan populations and forest cover need to be further developed.
- 6) Surveys in less explored areas such as Sarawak need to be continued.
- 7) Improved survey methodology for nest rate decay needs to be determined for more sites.

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However it also concludes that all efforts to monitor orang-utans will be to no avail unless the decline in numbers is halted urgently.

Orang-utans are one of humankind's closest relatives in the animal kingdom sharing 94.6% the same DNA as us. This perhaps gives us a moral obligation to ensure their survival. But more importantly they are a keystone species and a symbol for the threatened rain forests that are their home.

If the orang-utan can be protected, then by default, millions of insects, hundreds of thousands of trees and many birds and mammal species will also be saved. But ultimately these forests are vital for humans too.

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