

THREATS TO ORANGUTANS

Orangutans were recently classified as two distinct species. Separated geographically by island, one is found on Borneo and the other on Sumatra. The IUCN (Redlist 2007) classify Bornean orangutans, which are divided into three sub-species, as endangered and Sumatran orangutans as critically endangered.

Indonesia (where both species are found) has the world's third-largest contiguous area of remaining tropical forests but also the world's highest deforestation rates. Almost three million hectares of forest are lost each year, which amounts to over ten football pitches disappearing every minute (1).

In 2007, a UNEP report, *The Last Stand of the Orangutan*, suggested that 98% of Indonesia's natural rainforest may be destroyed by 2022, with lowland forests disappearing much sooner. As these forests fall, so do orangutan populations. Recent estimates put the Bornean species at less than 54,000 individuals and the Sumatran species at 6,600 individuals. The current rate of habitat loss, especially in Borneo, is causing orangutan numbers to fall. It is the speed at which they are falling that is a real cause for concern.

Orangutan habitat is being destroyed and degraded by illegal logging, oil-palm plantations, acacia plantations (for wood pulp), fire, mining and small-scale shifting cultivation.

Below is a brief summary of the main threats facing orangutans:

Oil-Palm Plantations: Indonesia and Malaysia are the world's largest palm-oil producers and global demand for this commodity is increasing every year, partly due to the expanding biofuel market. Orangutan populations are threatened because it is their habitat, tropical rainforest, which is being destroyed and converted to such plantations. By the beginning of 2004, there were 6.5 million hectares of oil-palm plantations across Sumatra and Borneo. Of this total area, almost four million hectares had previously been forested (2). Orangutans and the majority of biodiversity supported by tropical rainforests cannot co-exist with oil-palm plantations. The use of fire to clear land for plantations is an additional risk to this already serious threat.



Illegal Logging: In Indonesia, illegal logging has been a major and complex problem. An estimated 73-88% of all timber logged in Indonesia is illegal (3). Illegal logging has devastated protected areas, the last strongholds of orangutans. It occurred recently in 37 of 41 Indonesian national parks (2).

Forest Fires: The fires of 1997 and 1998, and more recently in 2006, caused terrible destruction to Indonesia's forests and killed, orphaned and displaced many orangutans. A combination of factors:



dry debris from logging; use of fire by palm oil companies; and El Niño (which resulted in a longer than normal dry season) caused the fire to devastate a huge area of forest.

Indonesia is the world's third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases with 75% of its emissions as a result of deforestation. Forest fires and the decomposition of peatland add 2,000 million tons of CO₂ to the atmosphere each year (4).



Illegal Mining: Mining has caused irreversible damage to Indonesia's forests. Tanjung Puting National Park, Indonesian Borneo has been

exploited by illegal open cast mining for gold. It has turned the lush primary rainforest into a barren and lifeless desert. Mercury, used in the mining process, contaminates the river systems.

The main threat to orangutans is habitat loss. However, this process of land clearing exposes wild orangutans and consequently some are shot. If infant orangutans survive the death of their mothers, they either end up as orphans in one of the rehabilitation centres or occasionally as a domestic pet.

1. Dr. Doris Capistrano. *The Future of Indonesia's Forests*. CIFOR 26/4/06
 2. Friends of the Earth - *The oil for ape scandal - how palm oil is threatening orangutan survival*. September 2005.
 3. Nellemann, C. et al. *The Last stand of the Orangutan*. UNEP February 2007
 4. Aurora, L & Ghosh, A. *Bloomberg* 5/6/2007 (source - Indonesian Nature Conservation NewsLetter).