

# ORANG-UTAN



notes

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The ancestors of orang-utans were ground-living animals that originated in Africa. They spread from there to mainland Asia several million years ago when the area was covered with lush forest growth. Then, about 100,000 years ago the advancing cold of the last Ice Age forced them from China southward. With the end of the period of intense cold, about 10,000 years ago, the water that was locked-up in the polar regions flooded the lowland areas of south-eastern Asia. This isolated the orang-utans on the islands of Borneo, Sumatra and Java. As the warmer conditions returned, the orang-utans were unable to spread north to the Asian mainland. Trapped on these islands they were forced to change their behaviour. Orang-utans evolved into arboreal (tree-dwelling) apes to exploit the food resources found in the tropical rainforest trees and the safety that they provided

from predators. In the process, orang-utans became smaller animals than their terrestrial ancestors (which fossil evidence indicates were about twice the size of the animal we know today).

On Java, orang-utans were eliminated thousands of years ago due to the lowland forests being cleared for farming and hunting. Today, the remaining orang-utans face the same, and some newer problems. On Sumatra, orang-utans have been exterminated from the lowland forests due to clearing for agriculture eg palm oil, rubber and pulp production. They survive in the remote northern forests but even here logging and advancing agriculture pose a threat. Bornean Orang-utans face similar pressures of survival. Logging and agriculture not only destroy the forests that orang-utans depend upon but noise, over-

crowding and increased contacts between individual animals lowers their reproductive rate. This produces a decline in the population. In addition to these problems orang-utans are still hunted for food, caught as young animals for pets and destroyed as a pest species when they raid cultivated fruit trees.

The establishment of reserves and national parks, and in the longer term, the development of a more rational system of use of the tropical rainforests of Sumatra and Borneo, will hopefully secure the survival of the orang-utan. Malaysia and Indonesia have successfully established a number of natural reserves for the orang-utan but forest clearance continues at a rapid rate outside these areas. With a world population of less than 10,000 and an ever-decreasing area of suitable habitat orang-utans are a Threatened Species. This means that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources considers them in danger of extinction. Captive populations represent the security against this disaster.

Male orang-utans have a striking appearance, being about twice the size of the female and having dread-lock hair. Cheek flanges enlarge their face. These are made of fibrous tissue and along with the long, shaggy hair enhance aggressive display. Recent research has shown that male orang-utans spend a large amount of time on the ground.

Orang-utans are slow breeders with females usually producing one young about every six years. They live to about thirty years of age and therefore produce only three to four young in a lifetime.

From their mothers, young orang-utans learn which leaves and shoots are edible and how to locate fruits such as mangoes, figs, lychees and durians. They learn the skills of finding and catching insects, birds and squirrels to eat. Probably by observation, the youngster will gradually develop the ability to

construct a sleeping nest and to obtain water by sucking it from a hairy hand, which has been thrust in a tree hole full of water. After about 6-7 years for males and 8-9 years for females, the youngster will become independent. Unlike Chimpanzees and gorillas, orang-utans are not social creatures. Males will consort with a sexually receptive female until she becomes pregnant. There is little social interaction between individuals at other times even if feeding in the same tree.

Adelaide Zoo successfully bred orang-utans for the first time with the birth of 'Indah' in July of 1986. This was a notable achievement because the parents were zoo-born themselves. 'Indah' has been sent to San Diego, U.S.A. to become part of their orang-utan breeding program. Adelaide Zoo received the female 'Karta' from Perth Zoo and later a male 'Pusung' from Singapore Zoo, a real favourite and much loved orang-utan who passed away in 2009. A composite photo of Pusung can be seen in the Discovery Zone of the Westpac Envirodome. Another male, Kluet, arrived from Taronga Zoo in 2007 who we hope will enable us to contribute to the world-wide breeding program of this most spectacular, but unfortunately threatened ape.

*George the orang-utan arrived at Adelaide Zoo as a gift from the Government of Sarawak in 1950 (being about three years old). His antics no doubt would have amused your parents or grandparents. George died in 1976 after some twenty-six years in the Zoo. A bust of George is located near the orang-utan enclosure.*

