

A refuge for orangutans?



- 1 In the lush rainforests of central Borneo, a group of young orangutans, endangered refugees from human development and now released here, swing from branch to branch in an unspoiled, 5,200-acre tract of Salat Island, acquired last year by the *Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation*. The foundation is working towards the relocation of hundreds of orangutans currently housed in cages in a nearby rescue shelter.
- 2 The *Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation* called Salat Island a “major breakthrough” in helping to save the species. For the last decade, the foundation has eyed the island as a potential orangutan haven: fertile with fruit trees, guarded from poachers by rivers and with no indigenous orangutan population to compete with for territory. But acquiring it was no easy feat: the sums involved were immense, and buying it from the local government presented a major administrative challenge that involved lots of paperwork.
- 3 Until early last year, when a major Indonesian palm oil company, PT Sawit Sumbermas Sarana (PT S.S.S.), swooped in and purchased part of the island for orangutan rehabilitation. The company even agreed to pay some of the foundation’s costs for monitoring and maintaining the island. “We believe we could coexist,” the company’s chief executive, Vallauthan Subraminam, said.
- 4 But the foundation’s partnership with a palm oil company worries some environmentalists, who are concerned that it provides a flawed company an easy cloak of respectability. The huge expansion of palm oil plantations is widely acknowledged to be a key driver of rainforest destruction in Indonesia, which deprives the orangutans of habitat.

“Isolated acts of kindness by bad actors like PT S.S.S. don’t erase that history and current pattern of destructive behavior, and they won’t save the Borneo orangutan from destruction,” said Gemma Tillack, the agribusiness campaign director at the *Rainforest Action Network*, an environmental organization. “If the company was serious about protecting the species,” she added, “it would make a binding commitment to end deforestation on its plantations.”

5 Concerns over deforestation have led some major palm oil buyers to halt purchases from the company. But for the orangutan foundation, the chance to release as many as 200 orangutans from cages was difficult to pass up. “If you say you don’t want to use their support, O.K., where do you get your support for the orangutan?” said Jamartin Sihite, the foundation’s chief executive. He said the foundation was also working with the company to protect wild orangutans currently on its plantations. “You cannot save orangutans if you work alone. No one can do that,” he added. “We must cooperate.”

6 Nearly every week government agencies and locals notify the foundation of baby orangutans that were taken as pets by villagers, usually after their mothers were killed as pests. The organization spends years rehabilitating the often-traumatized young orangutans. At the foundation’s forest school, local women working as surrogate orangutan mothers train the youngsters in survival skills, from identifying predators to learning which foods are safe to eat. But after a few years of ‘forest school’, many orangutans 19 their cages because suitable release sites are increasingly hard to find. But this year, the group hopes to release around 150 orangutans, thanks largely to Salat Island.

7 Some conservationists consider rehabilitation programs counterproductive, an expensive distraction from the critical mission of habitat protection. “Rehabilitation centers may even make the deforestation process worse,” said Erik Meijaard, director of *Borneo Futures*, a conservation group. “It goes full circle: Palm oil companies get rid of the forests, send in their orangutans along with some money. That’s just not how things can be if we’re serious about saving orangutans and other wildlife.”

8 *Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation* officials said that, unfortunately, their services were 20. The day after the release on Salat, phones rang at the center. People in a village a few hours away had taken in a young orangutan, its mother nowhere to be found. The foundation sent a team to fetch the orangutan and bring it to the center.

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