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**Slow, quiet creatures in a threatened world**

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* They may be very large and very red, but the wild men of Borneo, otherwise known as orang-utans, are nevertheless hard to spot in the jungles of Sabah. This is due in part to their habits. Unlike the ubiquitous macaque monkeys that crash through the trees fighting and jabbering, the orang-utan is a slow, solitary, quiet creature who blends surprisingly well into his background. While the macaques have adapted quickly to man - nowadays they even scavenge in towns - the orang-utans can survive only in their traditional rainforest habitat. And as that continues to disappear, so do they.

One of the great apes and, consequently, one of our closest relatives, sharing 96.4 per cent of our genes, the orang-utan is an endangered species. At one time, the orang-utan population was spread throughout Asia but now they are found only in Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo and on the island of Sumatra.

Estimates vary but there are thought to be between 15,000 and 20,000 orang-utans left in the wild, 10,000 to 15,000 of which live in Sabah.

The threat to their numbers is not new. Being so big and so slow, they have long been easy prey for huntsmen. From the 19th century, their habitat, the rainforest, has been plundered for timber and transformed into tobacco and rubber plantations. Nowadays, the plantations are more likely to be for oil palms - used in everything from ice cream to chocolate, cosmetics to engine lubricating grease - and they are a significant part of Malaysia's economy.

One of the worst threats to their survival, however, lies in their simply being so like us. The name "orang-utan" is from the Malay and means "man of the forest", and orang-utan babies are so irresistible and so like human ones, they have become highly desirable pets. On the black market - in Taiwan, for instance, they are very popular - some can fetch up to $60,000.

Sabah's government is well aware of the problem and supports the conservation of the rainforest and its orang-utan population, handing out heavy punishments for illegal logging or hunting. But orang-utan numbers are still dwindling.

A female does not reach sexual maturity until around nine years old. She usually has just one baby, leaving a long gap, about six years, before she produces another, and is likely to have only six to eight babies in her entire lifetime. Clearly, every baby orang-utan that disappears is a severe loss, so it has become important to reintroduce rescued orang-utans to boost numbers.

This is not as straightforward as it seems. The reason the baby orang-utan spends up to nine years with its mother is that there is a lot to learn. The orang-utan is the world's largest fully arboreal mammal, and making your way through the treetops when you're no lightweight (an adult male can weigh between 50 and 100kg) is not easy. Orang-utans have opposable thumbs on their feet as well as their hands and use them interchangeably, so climbing techniques are complicated. Too heavy to jump, they swing from tree to tree, judging distances and branch strength carefully. They eat a wide variety of fruits, leaves, bark, birds' eggs, ants and termites. In fact, there are thought to be 200 to 400 different foods that the baby orang-utan has to learn to recognise. Finally, they need to know how to build the nest they make anew every day.

In Sabah's Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre, wildlife rangers try to replicate this training with orang-utans that have been kept as pets. While they are still babies, they are fed milk in bottles and their ranger teaches them basic skills, such as climbing trees or exploring the use of their extraordinarily long and agile limbs. Later, they are paired off with an older orphan who becomes a mentor.

Gradually, as they become more independent, they live in the forest close to the centre, their food brought to a feeding platform twice a day. Confined to milk and bananas, the diet is nourishing but encourages them to forage elsewhere out of sheer boredom.

Rehabilitation is, however, a long process and not always successful. Sheena Hynd, a primatologist with the Sepilok Orang-utan Appeal UK (www.orangutan-appeal.org), says: "The scheme is definitely helping but numbers are still declining, and it will take time for the population to build again because orang-utans take such a long time to have offspring. But Sepilok has already rehabilitated more than 100 orang-utans back into the wild, and we are watching the populations carefully so we don't get too many big males in one area. Instead, we translocate to another larger reserve and that helps to increase the gene pool, too."

Translocation is by helicopter, and a ranger stays with the new arrival for a week to make sure its survival skills are up to scratch. New rainforest corridors are planned, too, to connect small, isolated patches of forest with larger ones to give the orang-utans a greater range of territory, food and gene pool.

Of course, all this is not cheap. Each orphan costs approximately £1,500 a year to rehabilitate. The Appeal UK group fund-raises with raffles, sponsored walks and special events but their core scheme is an adoption service. For £25 you sponsor a rehabilitated baby orang- utan and receive photographs and reports on its progress every six months.

At the Sepilok Centre itself, you can watch the young orang-utans coming to their feeding platform. They swing, play, drape themselves by their elbows over ropes and wrap their legs round their necks, or hang from a branch by their toes like bats. The visitors, naturally, love them and while the purists may baulk at the idea of animals on display, tourism may provide an unlikely salvation for the orang-utans. As visitor numbers increase, the importance of the rainforest to Sabah's economy grows. Jungle lodges are appearing along the wide brown rivers and mangrove swamps of northern Borneo. And while we visit them, the orang-utans may get a last chance to strengthen their tenuous hold on their vanishing habitat.