

Borneo's Last Stand

An indigenous community in Borneo shows a group of Canadian students how it's working to save their home from deforestation

BY BRENT LOKEN

Our group donned surgical masks to prevent the transmission of disease and quietly approached the orangutans. We wandered down a crumbling walkway, pushing back the encroaching jungle, and made our way to the back of the facility where 18 orangutans were locked in cages. We spent the next hour talking, holding hands and connecting with these amazing creatures.

"The afternoon spent with those orangutans, holding their hands through the cage bars, really affected the way I see this situation," said Nadine Crowe, one of the students who visited Wanariset, a facility belonging to the Borneo Orangutan Survival (BOS) Foundation. The organization began taking in displaced orangutans in 1991, and is still home to 18 of the animals.

"It is not enough to simply care for orangutans. It is our duty to eventually provide them with a quality of life similar if not greater than the one that they previously had," she said.

Crowe was part of a group of students from Quest University Canada, who spent eight weeks visiting conservation projects throughout East Kalimantan, Borneo. Their field school was run by Ethical Expeditions, a non-profit conservation organization working in Borneo. The group had the opportunity to speak with scientists and community leaders working to protect the country's remaining forests and cultural heritage.

Fifty years ago, Borneo was covered with lush, dense jungle. Today, less than half remains; most is located in the mountainous interior, aptly named the Heart of Borneo. The most notable species affected by this unprecedented rate of deforestation is the orangutan;

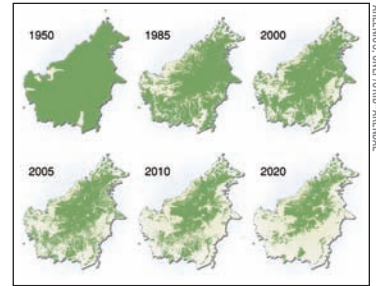


its numbers have decreased by half over the last ten years, to between 15,000 and 25,000. According to some estimates, we could witness the demise of the wild orangutan by as early as 2023.

The field school visited several individuals and groups trying to reverse this damage, including Willie Smits, who started an ambitious reforestation initiative called the Samboja Lestari Project (which means "everlasting forest" in Malay); and the community of Wehea, who are struggling to protect

their forest from open pit coal mining and palm oil plantations.

The Wehea Dayak people live in the East Kutai regency in East Kalimantan, Borneo. Deforestation of their land was causing bitter poverty, loss of agricultural land, an increase in flooding and, as a result, an increase in social tensions in their community. In 2004, faced with these pressures, and fearing the loss of their culture and destruction of their remaining forest, the Wehea Dayak declared 38,000 hectares of protected land. After this declaration, the



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community issued a customary law to protect their forest, which prohibited cutting down trees, starting fires and harvesting plants and animals from the forest. They then communicated this law to surrounding villages through town hall meetings.

The Wehea Forest is protected by a dedicated team of *petkuq mehuey* or “forest guardians.” These local men are initiated through a process called *nemlen*, which involves learning the skills necessary to protect their forest. For periods of one month at a time, the guardians stay in the forest and patrol for illegal activities such as logging, gold mining and hunting. Their efforts are having a tangible impact and each month they return to the village with pride, knowing they have helped protect their forest for future generations.

The conservation efforts of the Wehea Dayak are led by their tribal leader, Ledjie Taq. Taq was recently awarded the Kalpatura Award and the prestigious Bintang Jasa Pratama medal, two of Indonesia’s highest environmental honours, in recognition of his efforts and vision.

Despite these accolades, Taq isn’t slowing down. He knows the fight to protect their land must continue given current threats to their forest. A new coalmine being developed near the village is promising large salaries while pillaging the future of the forest guardian programme. A lack of financial resources also prevents expansion of their conservation efforts. Most importantly, perhaps, although the law enacted by the Wehea Dayak people is supported by the local government and tourism boards, it is not recognized under national Indonesian law, which means the forest can be converted to palm oil plantations at any time.

The palm oil industry is the main cause of Borneo’s deforestation. The substance is a type of inexpensive vegetable oil used in a variety of products including hand lotion, ice cream, candy bars, cosmetics, and biofuels.

Consumption of palm oil is rapidly increasing and expected to double by 2030, largely because of countries hoping to cut carbon dioxide emissions by using biofuels. Currently, pristine rainforest is being converted to palm oil plantations and the timber is being sold, while thousands of acres of degraded, yet usable land, lie fallow.

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The field school’s expedition highlighted many of the challenges facing this island, as well as the inspiring work being done by the Wehea Dayak to combat them. Despite the overwhelming obstacles facing this island, we left Borneo with a feeling of hope. Almost half of the forests of Borneo remain and a growing awareness to

protect these forests is rising, both within the people of Borneo and the international community.



BRENT LOKEN has travelled extensively in Borneo. His organization, Ethical Expeditions, is working with the Wehea Dayak and government of Kutai Timur on conservation projects to help protect the Wehea Forest in Borneo.

Join the Fight Against Deforestation at Home and Abroad

The task of combating global warming and environmental destruction is daunting. However, halting the loss of vital tracts of forests—in Borneo and elsewhere—is an issue where individuals can have a huge impact. Here are a few ways *Verge* readers can become involved.

Learn more about deforestation and palm oil: Indonesia and Malaysia are two of the world’s biggest producers of palm oil, contributing the majority of the 40 million tonnes produced worldwide. Across these two countries alone, the tracts of lands used for palm oil production have increased by 43 percent over the last two decades and unless this trend is halted, deforestation—and its effects on the climate—will continue.

Some headway has already been made to curb deforestation by organizations like the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (www.RSPO.org), which promotes sustainable practices and offers certification for companies that use palm oil. Consumers around the world can make a huge difference by demanding that products—like cosmetics, foods and biofuel—use either sustainable palm oil or don’t use it at all. Learn more at www.palmoiltruthfoundation.com and www.ran.org/category/issue/palm-oil.

You can also learn more about the particular conservation issues facing Borneo by watching videos filmed and produced by the Quest University Canada students who toured Borneo (www.youtube.com/user/ethicalexpeditions), or by reading about it at www.mongabay.com/borneo.html and www.worldwatch.org/node/6099.

Travel to Borneo and get involved: There are many individuals and NGOs working to protect the forests of Borneo that could use your help.

Kalimantan, where Ethical Expeditions focuses its efforts, is especially in need of dedicated volunteers and scientists. www.ethicalexpeditions.ning.com/page/volunteer-opportunities.

The Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation operates a two-week volunteer programme. You can also adopt an orangutan. www.savetheorangutan.org

Volunteer opportunities with conservation projects in other areas of Borneo are also offered by Global Vision International (GVI). www.gvi.co.uk/projects/asia/malaysia/volunteer-community-conservation-project-borneo/home