

The world's wild orangutans are on the brink of extinction. They have been driven out of the rainforests by loggers, killed as pests or caged as pets in the cities. **Aisling Irwin** reports from Borneo on the heartbreaking efforts of one man to save a species

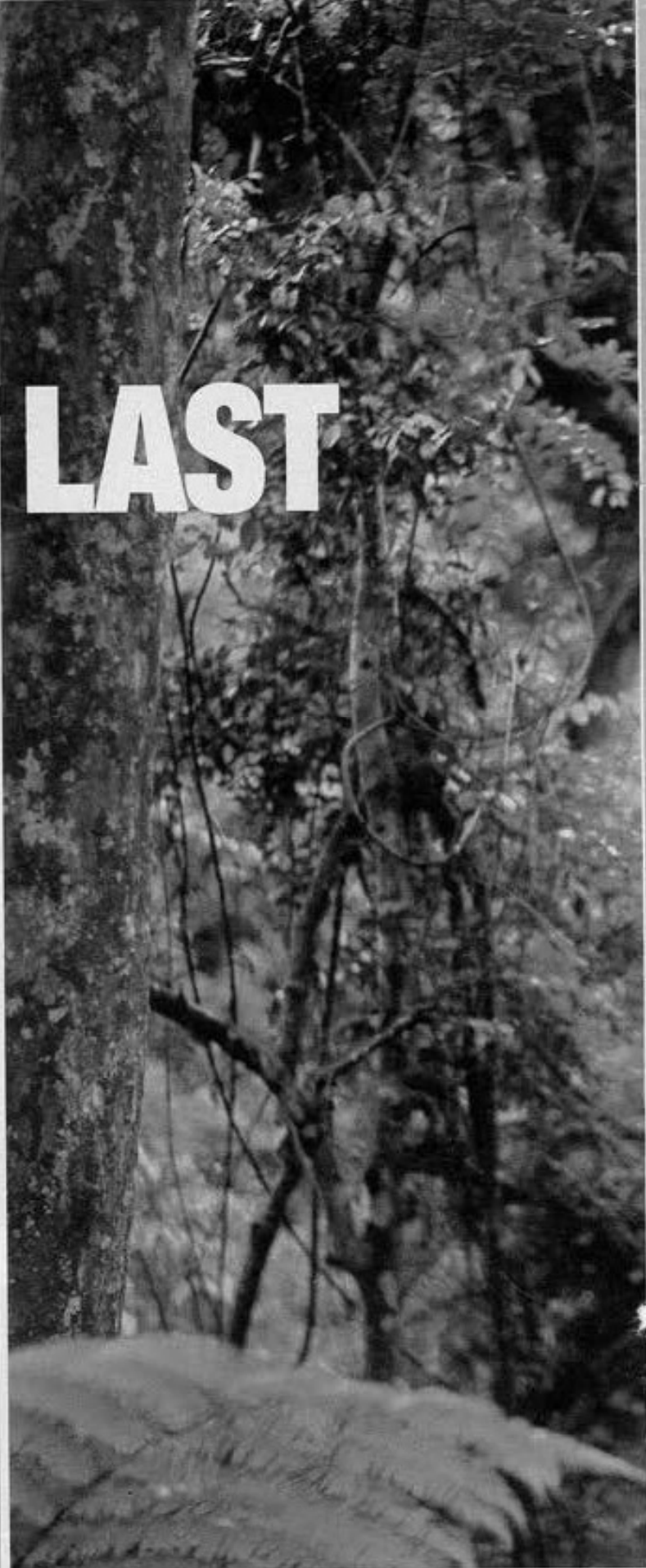
HOME AT LAST

Dawn is breaking in the rainforest in the Meratus Mountains of eastern Borneo. A small group is gathered on top of a huge box which stands on stilts six metres high. At a signal, one man releases a trap-door and two long-fingered pink hands with brownish nails appear from the box, swiftly followed by their owner, a magnificent, reddish orangutan. She has never before seen a rainforest but she pads undeterred to the nearest sapling. Her 13 companions, as if by rehearsal, emerge from the box and do the same. Within a few minutes they have clambered away and are lost in the rainforest, distant patches of red among the green canopy leaves.

This is an exhilarating moment for the watching humans as well. The orangutans have survived being orphaned, a caged childhood, an often-dramatic rescue, and then a crash course in the art of wild living. Now they are free, and each represents hope in the bleak, epic tale of orangutan extinction. For the wild orangutan is almost history, the victim of a chainsaw massacre of unprecedented scale. Once, millions roamed forests from China to Java. Now illegal logging threatens their survival in the two remaining islands they inhabit: Borneo and Sumatra. Chaotic Indonesia, to whom Sumatra and much of Borneo belong, has neither the political will nor any effective means to prevent it. There are now only about 25,000 left, and extinction in the wild is thought to be less than nine years away.

The lawlessness is blatant. In Tanjung Puting National Park on Borneo's southern coast, you can wait among the nipa palms that fringe the banks of its milky-brown river until the swift dusk turns to night. Soon you will hear the sound of the first tug. It is pulling endless rafts of illegally harvested valuable ramin wood. On each raft a logger sits quietly beside his billowing oil lamp. Typically, a logger who comes across an orangutan clubs it to death and sells its baby. Even if he leaves it alone, without the rich and varied pantry of the rainforest it is bound either to starve or to make its way to human settlements. There it will be killed as a pest, die of disease or accident or be captured and sold as a pet. There are a few organisations fighting on the side of the orangutan, the largest being the Wanariset Orangutan Reintroduction Project in Samboja near Balikpapan, in the east of Indonesian Borneo. It has taken in some 840 orangutans since 1991. Some of these are the half-starving victims of forest fires but most have been snatched from the rich who keep them as pets – illegally.

IT IS 6am, misty and cool. Suradya, a fresh-faced forestry policeman of 24, is driving us through the denuded hills around Balikpapan to the house of a policeman tipped as keeping a pet orangutan. Confronting a policeman is not something one usually does in Indonesia, especially if one is half his age and of lesser rank. But Suradya is inspired – and largely paid – by Wanariset. The house is in a well kept road; ducks scabble in the policeman's garden and pigeons of soft greys and



An orangutan in the rainforests of Indonesia – there are now only about 25,000 left in the wild

AMR INDONESI/DA



'They peer out through tiny hatches, unaware that their lives will change unrecognisably at dawn'

pinks flutter in cages. Down the side of his house, under a tree, is a cage of about a cubic metre. Inside is an orangutan. She plays obsessively with a dirty rag, dangling it out of the cage to attract two passing schoolgirls, who pause to pass her a soft drink through the bars.

Inside, the policeman is furious at the request from a bunch of subordinates that he surrender his orangutan. He threatens to kill anyone who makes a move towards the cage – the orangutan will die, too, he says. Suradya and his colleagues retreat – as forestry police they do not have powers of arrest and will have to return with those who do. So we drive to our second house, a serene chalet set in an expanse of green rice paddies.

The owner courteously invites us to sit down and obligingly fetches his elfin three-month-old for all to admire. The wide-eyed creature is compellingly cute – its spiky orange hair adorable, its face more expressive than that of a human baby and its antics more entertaining. The man claims he found the orangutan alone and unloved in the forest; he describes how he feeds it on rice and milk. He is obviously in love and he will not give up his pet. Not until several months later, with the help of arrest warrants backed up by police, are both orangutans brought in to a new life at Wanariset – although one dies of pancreatitis days after.

Wanariset is run by Dr Willie Smits, a tall, burly Dutch man, aged 44, clad in a huge blue boiler suit and with abundant dark hair. His speech drips with passion, his temper is short. Like many of the people working in this difficult world, he perceives persecution everywhere – in my questions, in the motives of funders, even in counterparts in the desperate field of rehabilitation. But then no easy-going person would stick at a project that generates enemies daily and lurches perilously close to bankruptcy (to confiscate, rehabilitate and release an orangutan costs £3,200).

'I'm extremely depressed now,' says Smits, his eyes widening almost petulantly. 'Sometimes I could just sit down and cry. But there's no other option. I could not forgive myself if I stopped.' His work began 10 years ago when, in Balikpapan market, he saw Uce (pronounced Oochay), an orangutan discarded on a rubbish heap and took it home. An ecologist specialising in tropical forest, he was in Borneo working for a Dutch rainforest research foundation and suggested that they turn to the orangutans. 'I didn't start for idealistic reasons but egotistical ones –

I wanted to keep my orangutan. Then the children started peering over walls and telling me about others they knew about and all of a sudden there were 23 more orangutans and there was no going back.' Today, the project is run by the Tropenbos Foundation, which works closely with Indonesia's Forestry department and is funded by the Balikpapan Orangutan Survival Foundation. Smits divides his time between Wanariset and numerous rescues across the archipelago. On every trip he makes another enemy among the privileged classes who, through the networks of corruption that sap Indonesia, are accustomed to being above the law. These people fight back. Smits's pet dogs have been killed one by one, their skulls deposited on his doorstep; he has been told he will be next. His family is in hiding.

Over a steaming plate of fried rice and cups of sweet, black tea, he hurls at me the manifold reasons for saving the orangutan: conservation; science; welfare; the preservation of a flagship species that is guardian of a whole pyramid of threatened plants and animals. But the real compulsion is philosophical. It is a reason that is slow to emerge, but you can grasp it when you meet an orangutan face to face, in the green half-light of the rainforest or, intimately, across the bars of a cage.

Orangutans look you in the eye. They meet your gaze with that of an equal. It is a startling moment – that first, personal exchange – as if there is mutual understanding. These creatures are so disturbingly human-like, so sophisticated, that they deepen our understanding of ourselves. Their continued, undisturbed existence is, on the most fundamental level, our gain. Orangutan lives give meaning to our own, revealing our origins through their social structures, their relationships, their nurturing, their tool use, their culture. Destroying them will rank as one of the great barbarous acts of humankind. A forest-dweller once told Smits how he shot an orangutan. Her dying act was to climb from her tree and stagger towards him. He feared she would attack him but instead she held out her baby and thrust it into his arms. Smits pauses over his food: 'If we let it happen that such a special, sensitive, intelligent animal can become extinct because of humans – if that could happen...' He does not finish.

Wanariset is a cool, shady place with vast cages, some as high as five-storey buildings, spread over a hillside, as well as a nursery, playground and clinic with an incubator, ultrasound scanning machine and X-ray

Dr Willie Smits's team have given this orangutan, Tono, lessons in survival in preparation for its return into the rainforest



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facility. Even with all this help, a sizeable number of orangutans die – malnourished, full of parasites and often with diseases caught from humans, such as TB or hepatitis.

The aim of rehabilitation is to replace the irreplaceable: seven years of attention given by an orangutan mother to her offspring, in which she inducts it in finding, identifying and opening food; in navigation; and in judging the strength and suppleness of branches. Wanariset pupils have often spent those formative years in a small cage eating noodles and rice.

Babies are allocated surrogate human mothers, and get to frolic on swings, climbing frames and various devices intended to develop their muscles and brains. They learn – the hard way – that dead branches collapse if you swing from them and fresh branches do not. Most former captives are a bit older, however, and the principle behind their rehabilitation is that they will do best learning from each other. Each is carefully introduced to a social group with whom he or she forms relationships and pools skills that will determine their chances of survival in the forest. This socialisation occurs in the vast cages – learning arenas that, though always being improved, are poor approximations to the forest. To convey the idea of ascending to feed, technicians introduce food every hour right at the top of the cages. Leafy branches mysteriously appear and are greedily taken for nest-building. As the orangutans near the time of release, their environments grow richer: exotic rainforest fruits and termite-infested logs appear, and they must learn how to poke a stick inside and extract the termites.

Before release, the candidates must pass an exam that tests three core skills – sociability, climbing prowess and ability to live off the ground, where leopards and sun bears are just waiting for an orangutan to slip. One unlikely candidate, Jarwo, easily passes the tests. He has only one arm: vets amputated the other when he fell from an electric cable as a pet. But the stump provides at least an armpit, useful for clutching branches, and he has learnt to open fruit with his feet.

In all, 14 pass and are rewarded by being put into cages, then loaded on to lorries for the eight-hour trip towards the Meratus Mountains, a remote and almost inaccessible haven between two rivers large enough, claims Smits, to house all the remaining orangutans in the world. At the end of

the dusty forestry road we cross the first river on a makeshift cage and pulley system – and enter the haven. Men sling the cages on to poles and stagger, four to a cage, into the jungle along paths and over ridges choked with the bizarre lives of true rainforest. Trees lie at the heart of the web of life here. Orchids protrude from their trunks, ferns nest in their armpits, strangling figs knot their snake-like forms around them. And orangutans should preside over it all, kings and queens in the canopy above.

At the release site the orangutans are led by the hand, like young children, from their cages to the box on stilts. There they can peer out through tiny hatches and we, standing in a haze of sweat, insects and misty rainforest wetness, can peer at them. The orangutans sleep there, unaware that their lives will change unrecognisably at dawn. At first light they are free and within an hour most have vanished.

Jarwo, the most confident, climbs the highest, in his jerky, one-armed way. But one animal, Peno, is uncertain. For an hour he pushes and pulls at the nearest sapling, climbs it and retreats. As he hesitates, a deep, jagged furrow in his neck – the imprint left by an iron ring – becomes suddenly visible. I was elated at the release but now there is a twinge of doubt. For these are the dregs of orangutan society – emotionally scarred, disabled and ignorant of the ways of survival.

Smits ferments with plans: he has already bought some islands as future reserves and is working on the purchase of a huge area of swamp in central Borneo, where some 3,000 wild orangutans are thought already to live. But eventually we have to pack up and leave the orangutans who have already disappeared into the jungle and rejoin the complicated mess that is Indonesia – its impotent police, indifferent government, corrupt military and its logging moguls – out of control, feeding the insatiable world demand for hardwoods. Anyone can witness the vast pyramids of logs – legal and illegal – that never cease to float down Borneo's arterial rivers to the sea. It is then that one has moments of gloom and Meratus can feel as ephemeral as a sand castle – beautifully made, but the tide is coming in. *To make a donation to Willie Smits's operation in Borneo, send a cheque made out to Balikpapan Orangutan Survival Foundation-UK, at 68 Aston Abbotts Road, Weedon, Bucks HP22 4NH. Website: <http://www.redcube.nl/bos/default.asp>*

Dr Smits with Uce, the first of more than 800 orangutans he has helped to rescue since 1991