

# THE QUARRY

**Teri Jane Boldizar**

**Person of the Forest**

I crossed the rickety handmade bridge precariously, one of the last in our group of nine; sent into the Sumatran Rainforest by Sydney's Taronga Zoo as part of their "For the Wild" campaign. My hands grasped at the thin stretch of rope that followed my path on both sides. The day pack on my back was tiny compared to the 55L backpack one of the village ladies had carried across that very bridge for me the night before, but every step I took still sent it swaying on my back. One of the girls ahead of me stumbled slightly over the thin planks, causing the entire bridge to sway violently beneath us and bringing my attention to the rattle that sauntered along below us. A nervous laugh wove its way through the group as our team leader standing at the other end of the bridge, feet safely planted on solid ground, yelled back that she'd make us wear helmets for the rest of the trek if we weren't careful. We were looking for semi-wild Orangutan that day; with one of Taronga's Orangutan keepers, and our local Indonesian guides leading the way.

Often forgotten or overlooked in the grand scheme of apes that humans share similar DNA with, the orangutan may be one of the most fascinating. Named for the Malay words Orang, meaning “people” and Hutan, meaning “forest”, the orangutan is literally the person of the forest. The similarities between ourselves and these forest dwelling apes appears to agree. Not only do orangutan share 97% of our DNA, they also display a variety of amazingly human-esque traits. For the first two years of their lives, orangutans are completely dependent on their mothers for everything. Other than humans, no other animal is known to spend so much time dependent on their mother. In fact, baby orangutans will cling to their mothers the same way toddlers do during the morning daycare drop off. Like many great apes, orangutan have developed tool use and arboreal though they are, construct nests for sleeping in, complete with “umbrella” style coverage to keep the rain at bay. The term semi-wild isn’t a term used professionally but you’ll find that organisations, and even locals to the area will often use the term. It simply refers to oranges that were captive but have been rehabilitated and released. It can also refer to parts of the rainforest that are tended to or have been built into for eco-tourism as we experienced that day.

We trekked through Bukit Lawang, a small village on the edge of the looming rainforest, greeted the kind locals who waved, smiled and complimented us on our pale skin and took note of the stalls selling beautiful handmade clothing. Those that live on the boundary of the rainforest and understand the importance of the rainforest and its animals rely on eco-tourism to bring guests and income that we gladly offer for such an opportunity. However, it was not just the kind people of Bukit Lawang nor the nearby orangutan that provided such an extraordinary experience. There were also the hundred or so long tailed macaques scampering around the village.

They darted in and out of house windows, travelled across clothes lines and stole the fruit of those who didn’t hide it away well enough before leaving their home for the day. It was our first glimpse of a Sumatran animal that wasn’t a cow hovering along the edge of a potholed dirt road. Looking to discover even more of the native wildlife, we continued on and into the depths of the Gunung Leuser National Park, a protected area of the Sumatran Rainforest.

It wasn’t long before we were completely enveloped in the beautiful tall trees of the rainforest; Damar, Rubber and Meranti, the few identified by our guide, Lily. It was our second day in Sumatra and the intense humidity and heat had already begun to take

its toll as, under strict time constraints, we made our way up hills so steep we were essentially rock climbing. Perhaps the helmets wouldn't have been such a bad idea after all. After roughly an hour of hellish trekking we reached a plateau onto which a platform had been built. Lily invited us to sit on the felled logs facing the platform, 'quietly, quietly,' he whispered.

We watched on as one of the national park ranger's deposited cups of water and bunches of banana onto the platform in front of us, and as he made his way back towards us, we readied our cameras.

'No orangutan for two weeks' he advised us, 'maybe none today either.' Prepared to see nothing, a thought that hadn't crossed my mind as I counted down the days to the trip, we sat and made quiet small talk. While it felt as though we had sat for hours, it was only minutes before the rustle of leaves in the distance made its way to our ears. A hush fell over our little crowd as slowly the sound moved closer. Heads swiveled wildly as we searched for what we could only hope was actually an orangutan and not a troop of macaque.

Finally, a blur of red swung through a distant break in the canopy just away from us. It moved closer and closer, until in a whirlpool of beautiful red hair, an orangutan finally dropped down on to the platform. My heart skipped a beat and in shock and awe, my mouth made a surely comical "O". Before us, a mere metre away, sat a female Sumatran orangutan; and clutched to her chest... Her baby.

With hair my ideal shade of red, the beautiful mother nonchalantly drank water from a child's blue plastic cup while her little one eyed us off from the safety of her hip, eating a banana he had snatched up from the platform upon their arrival. Apparently satisfied with his fruity finds, the baby orang decided to put on a show. The urge to squeal like a Justin Bieber fan at one of his concerts overwhelmed me as I watched the little one climb a tree, swinging and jumping back and forth between the nearby branches and the planks that made up his platform. Carrying her banana treats, his mother made her way over to sit within arms reach of him and this became a routine. He would frolic; she would follow, inching her way back and forth across the platform in his mischievous wake. Watching this orangutan show such concern for her child was such a sight. But it was one that was cut unfortunately short by the arrival of a much colder spirited mother and child duo. In quite a contrast to the behaviours we had just observed, the new arrival pulled the water bucket from the hands of the ranger and

swiftly stole the remaining fruit, sadly causing our first orangutan and her baby to swing away into the canopy. These wild orangutans face such potential dangers, and yet there, sitting on those logs, we saw two mothers, with their children, acting in the carefree way that any orangutan should.

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Orangutan face a great many dangers from humans. Population estimates from the most recent transect survey suggest that there are as few as 14,000 Sumatran orangutan left,<sup>i</sup> and only approximately 54,000 Bornean,<sup>ii</sup> leaving both species endangered, the Sumatran critically so. One major threat to the animals of Indonesia in particular, is palm oil. The destruction of palm oil plantations, in the last few years alone, has resulted in more than half of the Sumatran Rainforest - once the third largest rainforest in the world - being removed for palm or acacia tree plantations. And the Indonesian government has approved the removal of another seventy percent of what remains in the near future.<sup>iii</sup> The threat of unsustainable palm oil farming is no longer the tightly held secret that it was in the past though. More people are being educated in the dangers of unsustainable farming and make the active choice to buy sustainable palm oil or palm oil free products from their supermarkets.

Within Indonesia and Malaysia, the illegal wildlife trade of orangutans, most commonly below the age of two, is also booming amongst a select population of locals. The wildlife trade of orangutan occurs both domestically and internationally with most international trade occurring between other nearby islands, particularly in association with zoos that do not comply with the international ethical standards for captive animal care.

A mother orangutan is incredibly unlikely to willingly leave behind or surrender her baby. This means that for a young orangutan to be captured for the pet trade, its mother will most probably be killed while her baby clings to her. This is not only traumatizing for the young kidnapped orangutan but is also massively detrimental to the ability for repopulation of the orangutan populace. It is estimated that every year around one thousand Sumatran and Bornean orangutan are trafficked overseas and that as many as twenty thousand have been caught or killed for the trade over the last ten years. For every one baby orangutan that makes its way into a home as a “pet” or into a market to be sold, two other young and five mother orangutans have died.<sup>iv</sup>

Sixty percent of all orangutan that currently reside in sanctuaries and rescues within Indonesia have been confiscated from the illegal wildlife trade.<sup>v</sup> One particular orangutan, now under the protection of an Australian organisation, The Orangutan Project, was sold into the pet trade by a local fisherman for only \$10.40 AUD. The orang was found malnourished and weak, and was confiscated. One of the lucky few, he now resides temporarily in a sanctuary where he is being cared for. Through social learning among his own species and a special forest school under the safe eye of his rescue carers, he will learn necessary skills before being released back into the rainforest to live a natural, semi-wild life.

One of the most intriguing facts about orangutan is their self-awareness. A study which was first carried out in the 80's, found evidence of self-awareness at a level that is not present in humans until around 18-24 months of age. Orangutan marked with a safe and indelible dye while asleep, were placed in front of mirrors. Upon seeing their coloured reflection, they proceeded to touch their own faces and bodies. The conclusion of this study was that orangutan are more self-aware than human infants.<sup>vi</sup> With this in mind, it is easier, or perhaps harder, to conceive the horrific trauma that a baby orangutan suffers when taken from its mother and thrust into such a situation as the illegal wildlife pet trade.

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I had been seconds from deciding on the perfect spot to use as my jungle toilet when I heard a rustling to my left. Somewhat terrified, I did exactly what all the people in horror movies do and approached the foliage and squinted, staring out into the darkness. Unbelieving, I threw myself back into camp in a frenzy. The orangutan I had spotted flinging herself through the trees just behind me. The rest of the team spotted her in the same moments that they saw me and we all paused for a moment before racing to our tents to grab our cameras.

To our great luck, she stayed where she was; hovering in the trees above the little kitchen tent that had been set up in haste that afternoon as the rain had begun to beat down on us. She stood upright, very human in her stance, one hand and one foot fastened to a vine. Her other hand fell upon the baby that clutched at her chest. That was our third mother orangutan and at the time we were just halfway through our trek.

She graced us with her and her little one's presence for close to an hour before she swung off into the forest to make her nighttime nest. That wasn't the last time we saw her though.

The next morning as we packed up camp that all too familiar rustling worked its way to our ears yet again and, prepared as we were, we stood waiting for her reveal. She met us in the exact location she had occupied the night before and we soon discovered why as she made her way to the ground - a very unusual behaviour in orangutan - and stole our watermelon scraps. She stayed low to the ground eating the entirety of the watermelon skin while her little one suckled at the corner of a smaller piece, sucking up the last of the juice from our dessert of the night before. None of the guides recognized her as a re-released orangutan, she was just a mother taking advantage of her surrounding environment.

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During my trip to Sumatra, thanks to Taronga Zoo, I had the chance to see ten orangutans. Four were dependent infants; and one was only around five years old and still learning skills from her mother. These young orangutans are just a small number of the population lucky enough to have relative safety in their protected jungle home within the Gunung Leuser National Park in Sumatra. The helpful income provided through eco-tourism, donations from establishments such as Taronga and the forest rangers of the national park, attempt to protect them from people involved in this harmful trade. Not all orangutans have such luck, however.

Were orangutan faced with only the threat of deforestation and their population decline continued at it's current pace, the entire wild population of Sumatran orangutan would be completely wiped out by 2100.<sup>vii</sup> Deforestation is not their only concern, however. Organisations such as The Orangutan Project (TOP) which is run out of Australia and was first founded by an orangutan keeper at Perth Zoo, operate to rescue, rehabilitate and re-release orangutans that were taken into the illegal pet trade or became victims of forest burning or felling for unsustainable palm oil plantations. In fact, Perth Zoo recently became the first zoo to ever release a captive orangutan into the wild, to much success. The orangutan in question, Temara, now resides semi-wild within the Sumatran Rainforest.

So how can you help organisations like TOP and Taronga and Perth zoos save those orangutans who find themselves suffering at the hands of the pet trade and/or desiccation of their homes? You could choose to adopt a young orangutan online through organisations like The Orangutan Project, visit the zoo and adopt an animal or even donate to conservation efforts on a more general scale. Our support assists organisations tremendously in their attempts to protect these amazing animals either by leasing land for sanctuary or funding rescue centres.

The orangutan shares 97% of our DNA and possesses a level of self-awareness comparable to human toddlers but these people of the forest rely on us to triumph in this battle, to be able to live in their natural rainforest homes.

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