By: Mark Harrison

The name ‘orangutan’ is derived from the Malay words *orang* (person) and *hutan* (forest) and literally means ‘person of the forest’. Orangutans really do live up to their name, not only do they look fairly similar to us (some of us more so than others!), but they are also highly intelligent, use tools (e.g. sticks to prise open particularly tough fruits), have ‘culture’ (i.e. behavioural differences between populations that can’t be described on ecological grounds) and are very closely related to man (orangutans are almost identical to us genetically). Orangutans are largely solitary and spend the majority of their waking hours peacefully eating fruit.

Before the arrival of humans in Southern Asia, orangutans ranged from Vietnam and China in the North, to Indonesia in the South. There must have been thousands, if not millions, of orangutans at this time. Humans arrived in this part of the world a few thousand years ago and soon hunted the mainland populations to extinction. Today, orangutans live only in the tropical rain forests of Borneo and Sumatra in Indonesia, a tiny remnant of their former range. It is estimated that there are now only around 50,000 Bornean and 7,000 Sumatran orangutans remaining. These numbers are slightly mis-leading though, as many of these populations are very small and hence, probably not sustainable. The Sumatran orangutan’s future is particularly bleak; with possibly 1,000 orangutans dying each year, it really could become extinct in our lifetime.

Though still important, particularly to the Sumatran orangutan, hunting is no longer the orangutan’s main threat. The main threat facing orangutans today is habitat loss and degradation, exasperated by corrupt governments and officials. Vast areas of orangutan habitat in Borneo were cleared for conversion to rice plantations in the now infamous Mega Rice Project, which aimed to make Indonesia self-sufficient for rice. In spite of expert advise that the land was unsuitable for rice cultivation, the government went ahead, and felled and drained the forest. As the experts predicted, the project was a complete failure. The land, which was once home to thousands of orangutans and many other species, now burns every year (the smoke from these fires is a serious health and economic problem, with thousands becoming ill and missing work each year) and is a virtually lifeless wasteland.

Recently, large areas of forest have been converted for palm oil production. Palm oil grows well on poor soil and there is a huge domestic and international market for it. Palm oil is present in 10% of supermarket products, ranging from ice cream, to lipstick and paint and it is easy to understand the local peoples’ motivation to clear the forest to farm it. Despite some shift in demand over recent years, tropical hardwood is still in high demand and huge numbers of trees are felled each year to fuel local and national markets. Obviously, the clear felling of forests is bad news for orangutans, but selective logging (where only certain valuable tree species are taken) can be almost as damaging, especially if the trees taken are important food sources.

This is very depressing news (that’s conservation for you!), but it is wrong to blame the loggers and palm oil farmers for these problems. These are very poor people (local wages are about £2-3 per day) with no other option. If you were faced with the
dilemma of either cutting some trees down or not being able to feed your family, like me, I’m sure you’d choose the former. The majority of the blame lies with the people who fuel these markets, the buyers. If there were no demand for tropical hardwoods or palm oil, the forest would not be felled and the orangutan would still have a home. This is one area where we can help by not buying tropical hardwood or palm oil products. We can also help by never going to see or supporting orangutan spectacles (such as the despicable orangutan boxing shown at some parks in Thailand), as many of these animals are taken from the wild.

Another way you can help is by giving money towards orangutan conservation. The Orangutan Tropical Peatland Project (OuTrop) works in the Sabangau peat swamp forest, Borneo. This forest is home to the largest remaining population of orangutans in the world (6900 animals). Part of this forest was recently made a national park and hopefully, this will lead to increased protection for the area’s orangutans. In order for the national park to be effective for orangutan conservation, management plans must be based on solid scientific information, the public (especially school children) must be educated on what the park is for, why it’s important and how to find opportunities that don’t involve destroying the forest; and laws must be enforced. OuTrop actively works in all these areas by researching the orangutan population, educating local school children, and liaising with local officials and NGO’s. Any donations, no matter how small, will greatly facilitate this work. And who knows, with these actions, maybe there can be a future for the orangutan after all.

Cheques (made payable to ‘OuTrop’) can be sent to Mark Harrison, Wildlife Research Group, Department of Anatomy, University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge, CB2 3DY. Further information on OuTrop’s work can be found at www.orangutantrip.com (please don’t send cheques to the address on this website, the person named there has recently moved).
A fully flanged adult male orangutan from the Sabangau National Park. The cheek pads make the males face look bigger to impress the ladies and scare rivals, and the throat sack is used to make loud booming ‘long calls’ made to scare other males away from the area without the need for dangerous fights. Females don’t have these features and are only half the size of males.