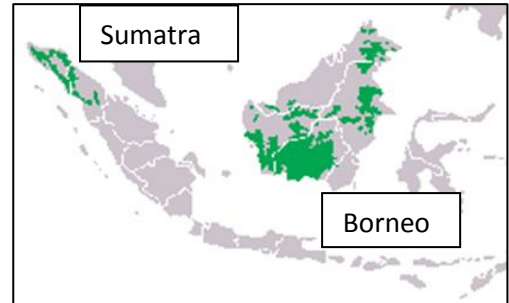


The orangutan and its habitat

Just like the gorilla, the chimpanzee and the bonobo, the orangutan belongs to the family of the great apes. These are the animals which are genetically most similar to us humans. The term “orangutan” means “forest people” in Indonesian, because they think the apes are far too lazy to work, so they pretend not to speak, and hide in the forest.

The orangutans only live in southwest Asia. There are two different species: the Bornean orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*) and the Sumatran orangutan (*Pongo abelii*). According to WWF in 2008 there were only 6000 individuals in Sumatra, but a hundred years ago you could find over 85,000 apes. Because of the decreasing population the IUCN calls them “critically endangered”. In Borneo the population is estimated at about 49,500 animals. At the beginning of the 90s there were over 150,000 “forest people”. Altogether, it is assumed that their numbers will decrease and soon the orangutan could be endangered.



The orangutans share about 97 percent of their genetic makeup with humans. The great apes have the precondition to an upright gait, but they move along while bent forward. Their arms are longer than their legs. Besides they have an opposable thumb which helps them to use tools. Their brain is relatively big, so they can see things in color and three-dimensionally. Their facial expressions and gestures resemble humans, because they are able to laugh.



The orangutan has long reddish brown hair. The male can be up to 1.5 m tall and weighs from 100kg, while the female ape only weighs 55kg. Unlike humans, the orangutans’ feet are far more flexible, so they can climb better, because they can hook into the trees. They in the trees almost their entire life therefore they have to learn climbing techniques and to brachiate.

Most of the day the ape tries to find food he likes - fruits, bark, leaves and insects. Because of their exceptional memory they find places again and they are also able to find healing plants or use leaves as drinking vessels or as shelter from rain. Furthermore, they disperse seeds and spread species, because of their excrements. By night they build a nest from branches and leaves in the treetop.

Orangutans have a very long generation cycle. After an eight month gestation period the female gives birth to a single young which stays beside the mother for six to eight years. She teaches her young everything it needs to know to survive in the forest. Not until 12 years is the young ready to mate. Because the offspring stay with their mothers for so long there is a gap of five to seven years between two births. The life expectancy of the primates is 40 years and normally a female rears up to three young in her life. Unlike the other great apes, orangutans do not live in a group. They only come together when females and their young build sleeping nests near one another or where there is a food source. The males mature at around 15 years of age and later develop their secondary sexual characteristics; they only stay with the females in the mating season.

The orangutan's habitat is the tropical rainforest. The climate here is diurnal, which means there are larger temperature differences between day and night than between the different seasons. And of course with a lot of precipitation. The rainforest is characterized by its enormous biodiversity. A typical attribute is the development of the complex vegetation-floors, which are the home to many characteristic species. Because of the high temperatures and the humidity the biomass production is very high.



Nevertheless, the rainforest is being deforested. According to estimates, in about 30 years the whole tropical rainforest worldwide will be destroyed. One reason is that the trees are cut down to harvest the wood. The wood is exported and processed for furniture or floor surfaces. Besides, there are plantations for cellulose used to produce paper or handkerchiefs. One of the main reasons for deforestation is the palm oil plantations. The oil of the fruits from the oil palm is used to produce a lot of different food and cosmetic products. Even in Europe there are many products, and the demand is rising. About 83 percent of the worldwide palm oil comes from Indonesia or Malaysia.



Because of the palm oil industry there is not only deforestation but also there is the draining of peatlands. But the drainage of the peat leads to intense CO₂ emission, because when the stored carbon comes into contact with oxygen CO₂ is released. Therefore almost four percent of the worldwide carbon dioxide emission is caused by Indonesia. Moreover, inhabitants and farmers are displaced to create space for the plantations. And in Indonesia the danger of forest fires has increased (furthered by illegal

agriculture).

Because of the deforestation the orangutans find less food and shelter, so they start to search on oil plantations, where the risk of capture is higher. The great apes are sold for their meat or as pets in private households for amusement, even though the trade is illegal. Besides the males are kept in zoos or in circuses where they are forced to do shows or other activities. This is also a reason for the disappearance of the orangutan from the rainforest.

In some regions in Indonesia there are stations where the apes are nursed and returned to the wild if, or as soon as, possible. The animals which are admitted are often badly injured or orphaned because their mother was killed. The helpers try to rear them and nurse them back to health with medicines. But it is very hard to return them to the wild because many apes are so injured and desperate they would not survive there.

Task 1): Describe the characteristics of the orangutan.

Task 2): Give reasons why the orangutan is critically endangered.

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