

# Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program



March 2020

Issue:87

## Code RED

an e-newsletter from your friends in West Kalimantan

Dear Friends and Supporters,

*Code Red* feels like a doubly appropriate name this month. We hope that you are all doing as well as can be expected as people around the world adjust to the new reality of living with the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it is having on communities all around the world. Many of you may be wondering how both our staff in Indonesia, and the orangutans, are being impacted. In the two articles below, I give you an update on the activities of our conservation and research teams and how we are adjusting our practices. Although we have to

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assume that orangutans may be susceptible to the SARS CoV-2 virus, I also provide some insight into why the behavior and lifestyle of wild orangutans may lead them to have less risk of infectious disease than their African great ape cousins. We can all do our part to #ActLikeAnOrangutan and practice social distancing!

As we enter into another month of living with the risk of this disease, we hope that you will all stay healthy and that we will see some hopeful signs of the abatement of this threat the next time I write to you.

Sincerely,



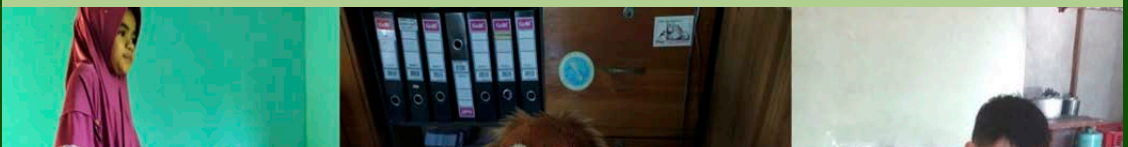
Cheryl Knott, PhD  
Executive Director

[Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program \(GPOCP\)](#)

## GPOCP and Yayasan Palung Go Virtual

By Cheryl D Knott, PhD, Executive Director and  
Victoria Gehrke, Conservation Program Director

As the COVID-19 pandemic has spread across the globe, it has also reached the cities and towns of Indonesia. In response, on March 23, the Ketapang Regency, where our office is located, issued the area to practice vigilance and alertness in order to help prevent the spread of the virus. People are to stay at home, practice social distancing, and close all non-essential businesses. GPOCP already took action on this front, and on March 20, for the protection of our staff, schools and communities, we chose to temporarily close down our office. Now, other businesses and organizations in our region have joined this effort. Our staff have been working from home ever since. Over the years of our conservation program, we have been working on building the capacity of all of our staff, and the communities we work with, to utilize technology. This now lets us work effectively as a team during these difficult times, through the power of working remotely. Our international staff have returned to their home countries and will continue to work from home until international travel is safe again.





From left to right: Sustainable Livelihoods Field Officer, Samad, with his two daughters in their home near Sukadana, our office orangutan puppet, and Communications Officer, Petrus Kanisius, at his home in Ketapang.

As one of our supporters, we are sure you are aware that the Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program uses a community-based approach to orangutan conservation here in West Kalimantan, and the restrictions on social contact have presented new challenges for our *in-situ* team. Our conservation team is turning their attention to some of our long-term projects and data analysis. Some of these activities include evaluating the recent social survey data on orangutan-human conflict that we just completed, examining our drone imagery on orangutan nests and comparing our field and ground survey data, using our existing archive of videos and photos to help spread our conservation successes both locally and internationally, maintaining connections with a wide constituency of Indonesians through our radio program, and developing new skills such as learning advanced spatial analysis remotely. The world is far more connected than it has ever been, even in faraway villages in Borneo, and thus our local staff are able to maintain contact with the communities that vitally still need our support. Our dedicated staff are working remotely but keeping the communities updated through digital communications and short meetings in small numbers when necessary.



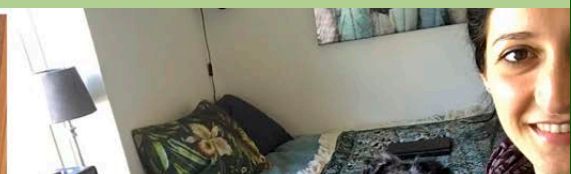
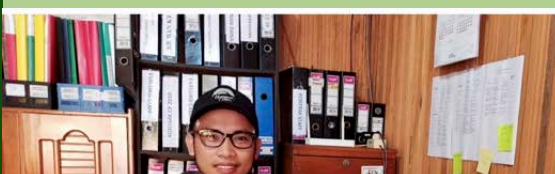


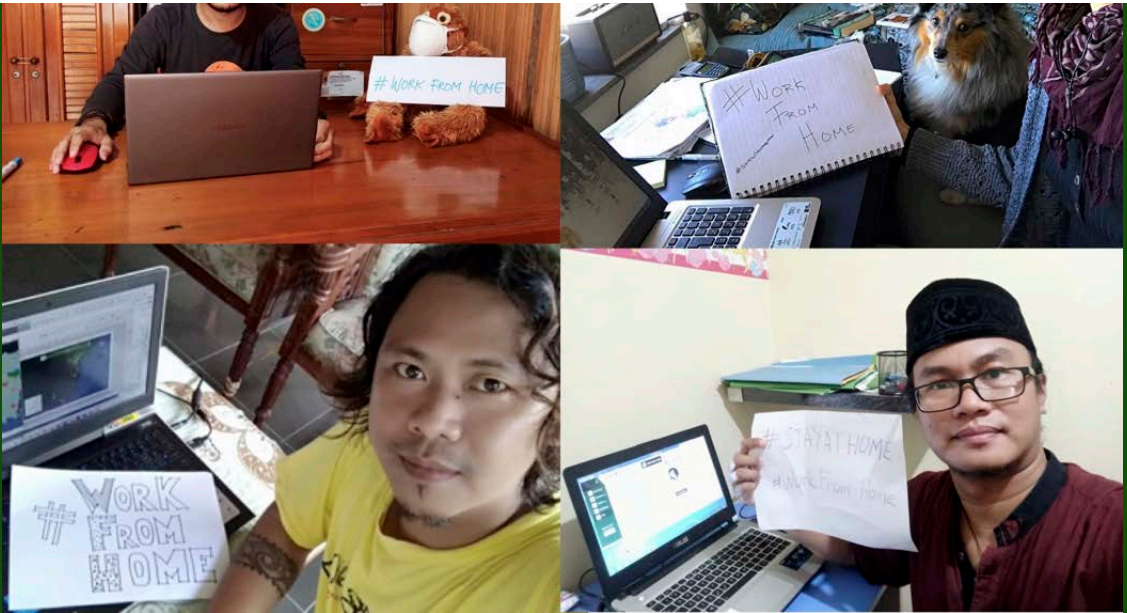


*Clockwise top left: Applied Conservation Director, Beth Barrow, working from home in the UK, Staff Botanist, Andre Ronaldo, in Ketapang, Environmental Education Manager, Mariamah Achmed in Pontianak, and Office Assistant, Rudi Hartono, also working in Ketapang.*

Our Sustainable Livelihoods team has had to postpone the organic food festival for now, but the silver lining is that this will allow more time for other collaborators to join in and we have a larger number of local government departments eager to join us. We have also been successful in creating an MOU with the local government regarding trade, enabling our artisan communities to sell freely at the local markets, participate in regional festivals, and provide support for making the targeted Organic Food Festival an annual occurrence instead of a one-time event. After a successful training event, we are launching an online shop for our artisans to sell their products regionally. Additionally, we have conducted a biodiversity survey in one of our target villages, Matan, and are currently analyzing the data to disseminate the results to local stakeholders.

Our Environmental Education team is using this time to re-invent some of the content of our outreach activities and produce educational posters for the Eco-Trail at our Education Center, Bentangor. Our Education team's biggest challenge has been to rework our West Bornean Orangutan Caring Scholarship selection process that normally takes place in March and April every year. This scholarship program enables 6 motivated and underprivileged local students to attend university with a four-year scholarship for a Bachelor's degree in a topic of their choice. These spots are highly sought after, so the selection process is quite rigorous and involves interviews, presentations and essays with guest judges. As an alternative, our team has offered the applicants the opportunity to submit videos instead of giving in-person presentations and we are conducting video calls for interviews. Our conservation awareness campaigns are in full swing as always, with a new Indonesian newsletter tentatively planned for the end of May. We are also able to continue our radio talk shows, while adjusting broadcasting time to reduce social contact. Stay tuned for our exciting Earth Day plan that has been entirely adapted to the lock down!





*Clockwise top left: Environmental Education Field Officer, Simon Tampubolon, working in Ketapang, Program Director, Victoria Gehrke, working from Sweden, Research Director Wahyu Susanto, in Jakarta, and Animal & Habitat Protection Coordinator, Erik Sulidra, in Ketapang.*

Our Customary Forest team is working on coordinating biodiversity surveys to compare to previous years and provide new baseline data for new forests, as well as updating maps and submitting reports for local government support of ecotourism and trade in our village forests. Our team recently held a successful eco-tourism workshop with our Customary Forest Management Board, bringing them one step closer to independently managing their forests for long-term conservation success and financial stability.

Luckily, our nest and drone survey team wrapped up their last survey in Gunung Palung National Park at the end of February, but we still have data entry and analysis to complete. Applied Conservation Director, Beth Barrow, is coordinating this effort from England, and working with Boston University undergraduate student, Madeline Eori, who is developing this methodology as part of her undergraduate thesis. We are also involving others, now with a lot more time on their hands, to help with this processing of images

We predicted that our Wildlife Crime and Investigations Unit would face problems gathering data from informants in the villages during these trying times, however they have been providing us with tips and data despite the social distancing restrictions in March. April's lock down will prove more challenging for sure, but our village informants promised to keep their eyes open. Meanwhile, our team is working on detailed maps of regional illegal trade routes and conflict hot spot maps extrapolated from our Human-Orangutan Interaction survey data. We are also working to push for our reports to lead to government action regarding prosecutions and confiscations from the Natural Resources Department. As COVID-19 hits Borneo, we need to make sure that we remain vigilant. One issue we are keeping a close eye on is whether



this pandemic will result in an increase in the illegal pet trade or illegal logging as forest monitoring decreases. Furthermore, economic hardship could increase pressure on local communities. Thus, we want to ensure that we continue to provide local communities with the resources they need to sustain their families without being forced to turn to activities that destroy the orangutan's rainforest habitat.



*Clockwise top left: Natalie Robinson, working from Pennsylvania, Executive Director, Cheryl Knott, in Massachusetts, Postdoctoral Researcher, Erin Kane, in Massachusetts, and Development Director, Terri Breeden, in Florida.*

So, conservation has gone digital this spring with online events and data analysis keeping the staff engaged and continuing to meet our objectives of guiding communities towards environmentally friendly livelihoods, conserving vital orangutan habitat and protecting vulnerable wildlife. We look forward to updating you more on the projects and program as the situation develops on the ground. As conservation leaders we understand that our world is ever-changing

conservation leaders we understand that our world is now more interconnected than ever. We hope that all of our followers and supporters from around the world remain healthy as we continue to ensure a future for wild orangutans and their habitat.

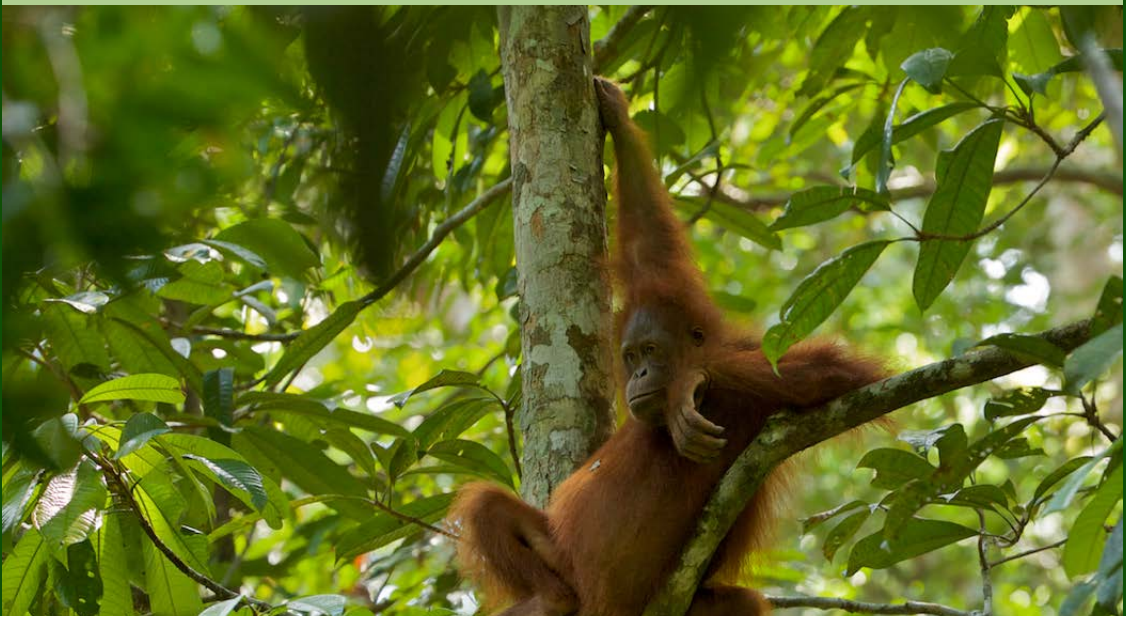
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## #ActLikeAnOrangutan - Practice Social Distancing

By Cheryl D Knott, PhD, Executive Director

As the human world struggles with the global COVID-19 pandemic, we perhaps can learn something from orangutans. Unlike most primates, who are known for their high sociality and group living behavior, orangutans spend the majority of their time alone. What can these semi-solitary apes teach us about the relationship between social distancing and disease?

The human species is now carrying out a world-wide experiment on the impact of social distancing and we can see for ourselves that this stops the spread of disease. As natural social distancers, orangutans seem to have much lower incidences of illness than the African Apes. Our twenty-six years of data on wild orangutans in Gunung Palung National Park show no evidence of respiratory infections or the spread of infectious disease. In fact, there are no documented cases of widespread infection across any population of wild orangutans. This is remarkable in light of the respiratory illnesses that have been seen to ravage many African Ape (chimpanzee, bonobo and gorilla) study populations. Recording signs of illness and using field tests to look for signs of disease has been a hallmark of our study since it first started in 1994. But, we just don't see the widespread sneezing, coughing, and runny noses that our colleagues studying chimpanzees, in particular, often witness.







*Adolescent female orangutan, Walimah, looks like she is enjoying some reflective time alone.*

This difference can be attributed, in large part, to the vastly different social systems of orangutans and chimpanzees. Chimpanzees are simply much more social than orangutans. Their fission-fusion social system means that their group size varies, but they spend far less time alone. Chimpanzee subgroups are constantly changing, meaning that individuals, and whatever infections they carry, regularly contact other individuals. In contrast, over the total 26 years of our study at Gunung Palung, orangutans encountered another orangutan on only 25% of the days they were followed. Thus, 75% of the time they were entirely alone. On those days they do have a social interaction, they spend an average of just 40% of their day together at an average distance of 18m (59 feet). Of course, there are some days that they spend the whole day together in close proximity, but other days a social encounter may just be passing by another orangutan who is 50m (164 feet) away! For orangutans, we consider that to be a 'social' interaction. Chimpanzees, on the other hand, not only spend more time together, but they can spend several hours a day grooming each other in close bodily contact. In contrast, we've never witnessed adult orangutans grooming each other!



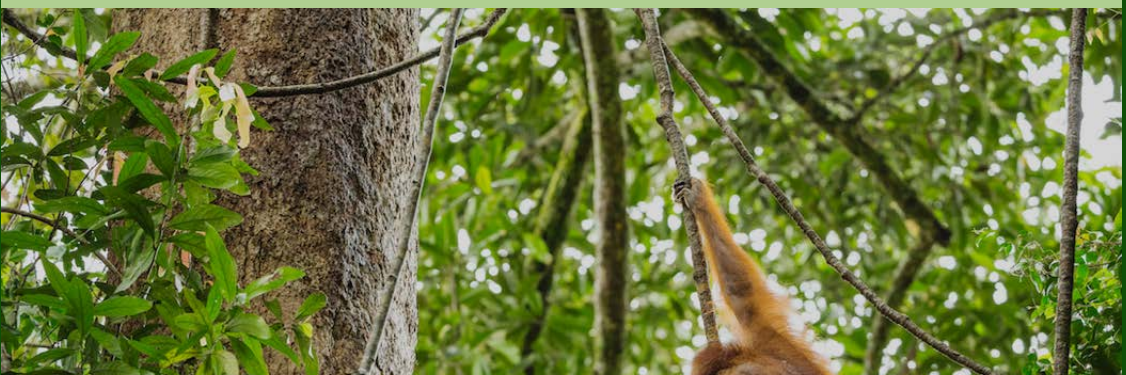




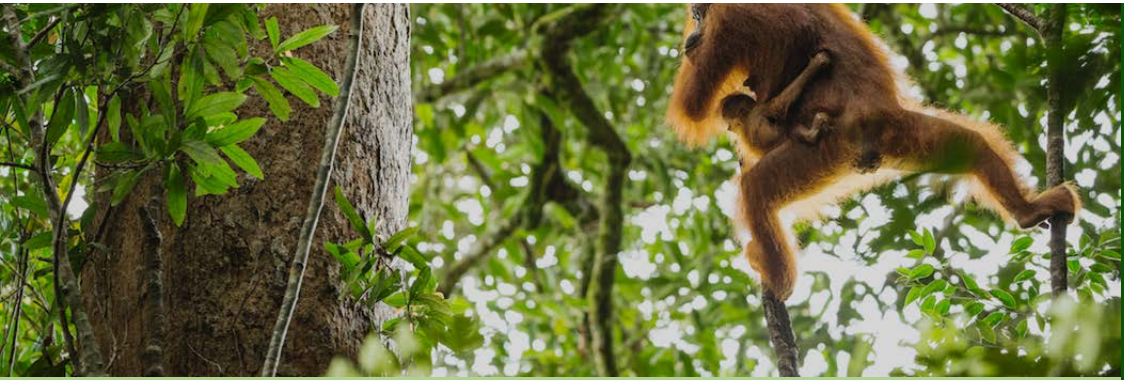
*Orangutans spend most of their lives at a significant distance from other orangutans.*

This kind of 'social distancing' in orangutans means that infectious disease has little chance of taking hold in orangutans. In fact, this was recently modeled in a paper by [Carne et al. \(2014\)](#) that looked at the projected impact of the social system on the spread of respiratory disease in chimpanzees and orangutans. They found that orangutans had a very low probability of spreading disease, even if it was highly infectious. Chimpanzees, on the other hand, showed a high degree of vulnerability to infectious respiratory diseases. These findings are borne out by the experiences of researchers studying both species in the wild.

Contributing to the lack of infectious disease transfer from humans to orangutans in the wild is that orangutans' arboreal nature also helps separate them from people. The average height in the tree canopy of orangutans at Gunung Palung is 20m (about 66 feet), which means that the distance between them and human observers is usually at least 30 m (98 feet). The current recommendation from the [IUCN SSC Wildlife Health Specialist Group and the Primate Special Group, Section on Great Apes](#) is to keep 10m away from apes to eliminate any possibility of the spread of disease. Additionally, disease can spread through contact with surfaces, and the much greater terrestrial movement of the African apes, as well as captive or rehabilitant orangutans, increases the potential for disease transmission. Across all of our data, orangutans at Gunung Palung have been seen to come to the ground in our presence less than 1% of the time. If they do come to the ground, they spend only about 8% of their time there. In addition, orangutan arboreal behavior in Borneo may be particularly pronounced at Gunung Palung because our primary forest structure, with taller trees, likely contributes to higher average height, and less time on the ground for orangutans compared to many other sites.







*Babies hold tight to their moms – their main social partner throughout their juvenile years.*

Although the natural social distancing that is characteristic of orangutans explains their low incidence of disease, it doesn't mean that they are immune to such infections if conditions become crowded or if they have closer contact with humans. In zoos and rehabilitation centers they do get respiratory infections. Thus, precautions are regularly taken when contacting the animals in these facilities. Most of the rehabilitant and rescue centers have stopped tourism for now and limited the number of staff that are in contact with the animals. These are important and reasonable measures. All the great apes are closely related to humans, and thus if they do get in close contact with us, there is a high likelihood that they might suffer from the same diseases we do.



*Orangutan adults always sleep alone – making a new nest in the canopy almost every night.*

Even if the likelihood of disease transfer is extremely low in the wild,



we at GPOCP remain vigilant to any impact we may have on wild orangutans. Thus, we are continuing to make sure that we maintain this average 30m distance separation from the animals and that only essential staff are allowed to follow them. Our location at Cabang Panti Research Station is relatively isolated with little human traffic in and out. As with communities elsewhere, we have instituted increased attention to hand washing, use of hand sanitizer, and social distancing. We are making sure, for the health of both orangutans and people, that anyone with a fever or sickness doesn't come to the field station and follows a two week quarantine in their home village if they show any sign of illness. We care deeply about ensuring the safety of our staff and are making sure everyone is well rested and staying healthy. As we all continue our practice of social distancing around the globe I can't help but feel that the world is becoming a little more like the orangutan - the person of the forest.

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*"No matter what happens, or how bad it seems today, life does go on,  
and it will be better tomorrow."*

Maya Angelou



Our Contact Information  
Gunung Palung Orangutan  
Conservation Program  
P.O. Box 15680  
Boston, MA 02215  
1-617-353-7723  
<https://www.savewildorangutans.org/>



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