

Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program

Code RED

an e-newsletter from your friends in West Kalimantan

October 2020

Issue 94

Dear Friends and Supporters,

October has been a busy month at GPOCP. Some schools in the Kayong Utara Regency opened back up, and limited Environmental Education programming has been able to resume. The second edition of our [Indonesian language newsletter](#), MlaS, also came out this month, focusing on the theme, "the natural carrying capacity of the environment." Some of the topics covered include our recent biodiversity surveys, hydroponic gardening workshops, and student internships, as well as the importance of wetlands and peatlands, and causes of regional flooding. Indonesian speaking friends, please check it out!

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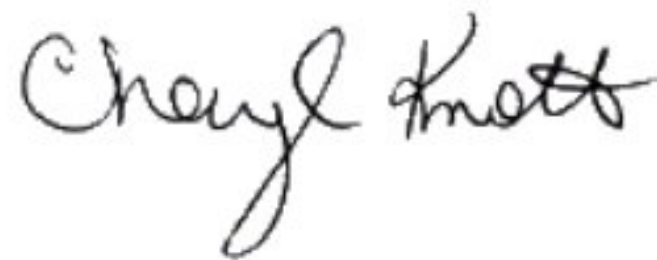
In the first article, GPOCP Program Coordinator, Natalie Robinson, and I write about the connections between COVID-19 and our conservation work. Human and planetary health are inextricably linked, and we share some thoughts and recent research that has come out on this topic.

Our second article comes from GPOCP Field Director, Edi Rahman. Edi writes about his 18 years of experience working for the Wildlife Crime and Investigations team.

As we enter November, we're excited to continue with some of our newer projects, including finishing up our Human-Orangutan Interaction survey throughout 14 local villages that border the National Park. Next week also marks Orangutan Caring Week. Youth group members and West Bornean Orangutan Caring Scholarship students are busy planning special events that will take place throughout the week! Be sure to follow us on [social media](#) to keep up-to-date with everything that's going on.

I wish you all a happy and healthy November.

Sincerely,



Cheryl Knott, PhD
Executive Director
[Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program \(GPOCP\)](#)

COVID and Conservation: How we can heal the planet and our health

By Cheryl Knott, Executive Director & Natalie Robinson, Program Coordinator

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has consumed every aspect of our lives. In many ways, it has served as a wakeup call. In the early months, reports of increased wildlife sightings and decreased carbon emissions supplied a glimmer of hope in an otherwise dark time. Since then, as we have settled into this 'new normal', the excitement from such sightings have subsided, though we continue to learn how interconnected environmental and human health are.

The World Health Organization [Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus](#), said "The pandemic is a reminder of the intimate and delicate relationship between people and planet. Any efforts to make our world safer are doomed to fail unless they address the critical interface between people and pathogens, and the existential threat of climate change, that is making our Earth less habitable."

At GPOCP, we too have found that now, more than ever, our conservation work is of utmost importance. We are ever more concerned about global health, as wildlife and habitat encroachment can cause detrimental zoonotic diseases, like COVID-19. Tropical forest edges, like those surrounding Gunung Palung, are major breeding grounds for novel viruses. Deforestation further exacerbates this issue, increasing the length of forest perimeters, and therefore the frequency at which human-wildlife interactions occur ([Dobson et al. 2020](#)). More forest edges are created as humans build roads and clear forests. In the Gunung Palung region, forests are destroyed for large-scale agriculture, mining, and logging, which continues to create more areas for humans and wildlife to come in contact, causing conflict or spreading disease.



Palm oil plantations, like the one pictured here, surround Gunung Palung National Park. Land continues to be cleared for the creation of more plantations, further increasing forest perimeters, and the areas in which human-wildlife interactions are likely to occur. Photo by Tim Laman.

There are also many consequences of the pandemic that may be less obvious. With shutdowns of research sites and conservation organizations, delays in training and career development may deter students and interns from pursuing careers in conservation, and steer them towards other careers with more stability or better pay instead. The pandemic has caused scientific research and conservation conferences and meetings to be cancelled or moved online, limiting the amount of networking that can happen. A temporary lack of research may also cause missed opportunities to identify conservation priorities and wildlife health and ecosystem monitoring ([Corlett et al. 2020](#)). Furthermore, conservation work is dependent on funding. Hits to the global economy have meant a freeze of many funding agencies, making it even more difficult to carry on with work. COVID-19 lockdowns and stay-at-home mandates have halted most global tourism and many scientific field research sites have temporarily shut down. This also means a stop to the surveillance of protected areas around the world. As conservation activities and organizations' presence leave these areas, more poachers have had an opportunity to come in. Economic pressures also force people to hunt bushmeat for survival or illegally log as a means of income ([Hu et al. 2020](#)).

At times, these harsh realities can feel overwhelming. With so many unhealthy people and habitats, how can we begin to reverse what seems to be our impending future? Around the world, more than 11 trillion dollars have been allocated by governments towards economic stimulus. Yet, conservation initiatives have received no such funds ([McCleery et al. 2020](#)). Funding conservation is essential to keep organizations running, and conservation work is essential to prevent future pandemics.

Dobson et al. (2020) argue that investing in the prevention of tropical deforestation, as well as limiting wildlife trade, will protect us from future zoonotic disease outbreaks. There is a high return on investment in limiting zoonoses, yet still, relatively little is invested toward preventing deforestation and regulating wildlife trade. The associated costs of preventative efforts are substantially less than the economic and public health costs of responding to diseases once they have already emerged. Action now will prevent future outbreaks, and save money in the long run.



An orangutan travels across a tree limb in a degraded forest, on the edge of Gunung Palung National Park.

Indonesia has one of the highest populations living in poverty, is one of the biggest emitters of carbon, and is also one of the most biodiverse places on the planet. This creates a clash between protection of this biodiversity and a need to increase local livelihoods. At GPOCP we employ the *Living Landscapes* concept to guide our goals and programming – this approach addresses not only conservation and biodiversity protection, but incorporates the human element and influence on nature in order to create a more resilient impact. Not only do we support flagship species conservation, but also ecosystem protection and human community development. As a result, we are able to improve the lives of some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people living around GPNP. Through our conservation and research programming, we touch thousands of lives each year, on local, national, and international scales.

It remains our mission to protect wild animals and wild spaces for the future health of humans and animals. Thanks to supporters like you, GPOCP can continue to fight for the health of our planet.



A drone image, captured by the GPOCP investigations team, shows a patch of forest being burned to make way for agriculture.

Threats to orangutans and our efforts to save them - Changes in trends from 2002 until now

By Edi Rahman, Field Director

The land within the Ketapang and Kayong Utara Regencies is mostly made up of peat swamp. This is a comfortable habitat for orangutans and other wildlife to live. However, many people in the region are not aware of the importance of orangutans and their habitat. Orangutans continue to be disturbed by human expansion, and are continuously being hunted, traded, and kept as pets. Additionally, their habitat continues to be disturbed by human activities such as logging and mining, and the clearance of forests for large-scale plantations.

As a result, GPOCP (known as Yayasan Palung in Indonesia) created our Wildlife Crime and Investigations program. We carry out investigative activities in the field, and work with the local Environmental Agency (BKSDA) to rescue and relocate animals. We also promote the conservation of habitats through our Customary Forest, Environmental Education and Sustainable Livelihoods programs.

2002 - 2008

In 2002, I started working at GPOCP as an Animal Protection Investigator. I worked in the field to collect data and information on crimes against orangutans, like hunting and trafficking, in the Ketapang and Kayong Utara Regencies. During my first year at GPOCP there were many cases of crime against individual orangutans. Interestingly, there was not one type of person who was more likely to participate in these illegal activities. Both wealthy and less advantaged people, and educated and undereducated people all partook. In fact, it was quite surprising that from 2002 - 2008 there were many cases of orangutans being kept as pets that took place in the city center of the Ketapang Regency, especially in Delta Pawan District and Benua Kayong District. Even though it is known that the two sub-districts are not forested and are not good habitat for orangutans, there were many cases of orangutans as pets. This fact reinforces that, during those years, the orangutan trade was rampant because all the orangutans found from our investigations came from the vicinity of the Ketapang Regency, outside of the naturally forested areas.



An orangutan that was illegally kept as a pet. The GPOCP team rescued this individual in 2008.

What is even more sad is that when orangutans are kept as pets, they are treated unfairly and they are deprived of the freedom they deserve. Orangutans are kept in cages and most of them are always tied up in iron chains. Orangutans are given unnatural food and drink such as rice, noodles, and coffee. In the wild, they only eat fruits and other plant matter. In order to save individual orangutans and provide awareness to the community during these years, law enforcement presence was intensified. Orangutan confiscations were carried out by the West Kalimantan Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA). This helped to decrease the number of cases of orangutans kept as pets, and increased public awareness.

At this time, the orangutans that were rescued by law enforcement temporarily stayed in various animal transit cages and received treatment before being sent to a rehabilitation center in Central Kalimantan. GPOCP managed this process in collaboration with BKSDA from 2002 - 2009. Beginning in 2009, this process was taken over by International Animal Rescue (IAR), also based in Ketapang.



A member of the West Kalimantan Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA) holds an infant orangutan that was confiscated from a local village in 2007.

During this period, in addition to the high number of orangutan trafficking cases, illegal logging activities were also rampant. The Ketapang and Kayong Utara regencies were a hotspot for logging, causing a detrimental effect on important orangutan habitat. In fact, these areas are the biggest contributors to illegal timber in all of West Kalimantan. Recent decreases in illegal logging activities occurred after the "Wanalaga 1" and "Wanalaga 2" operations, carried out by the Indonesian National Police and the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry in March 2008.

Between 2004 and 2019, GPOCP uncovered 182 cases of crimes against orangutans – 148 cases of orangutans being trafficked, and 34 cases of orangutan conflict in villages. Most of the cases of orangutans being kept as pets occurred between 2004 and 2009, while most cases of human-orangutan conflict took place from 2015-2019.

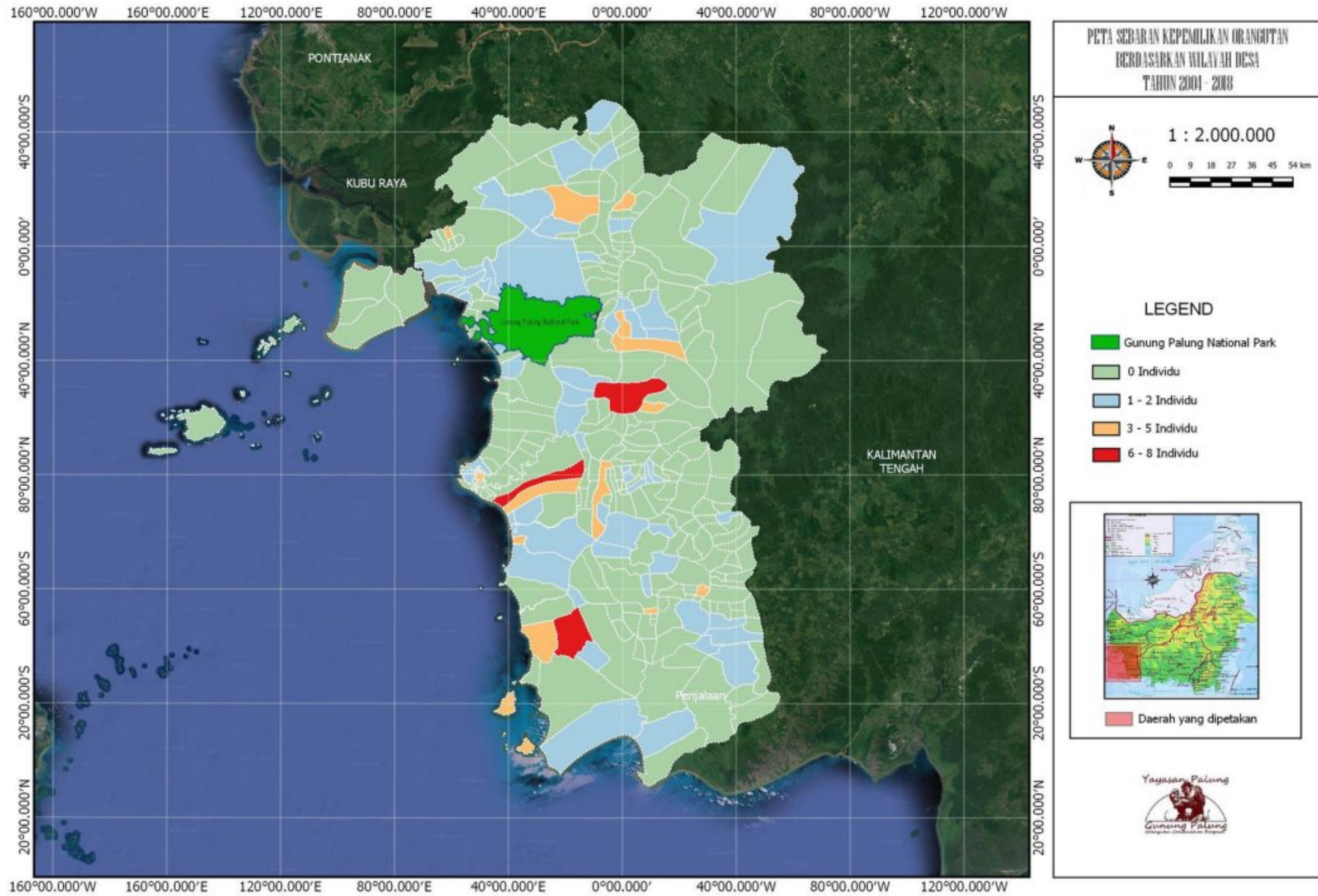


GPOCP staff managing temporary animal transit cages in 2004.

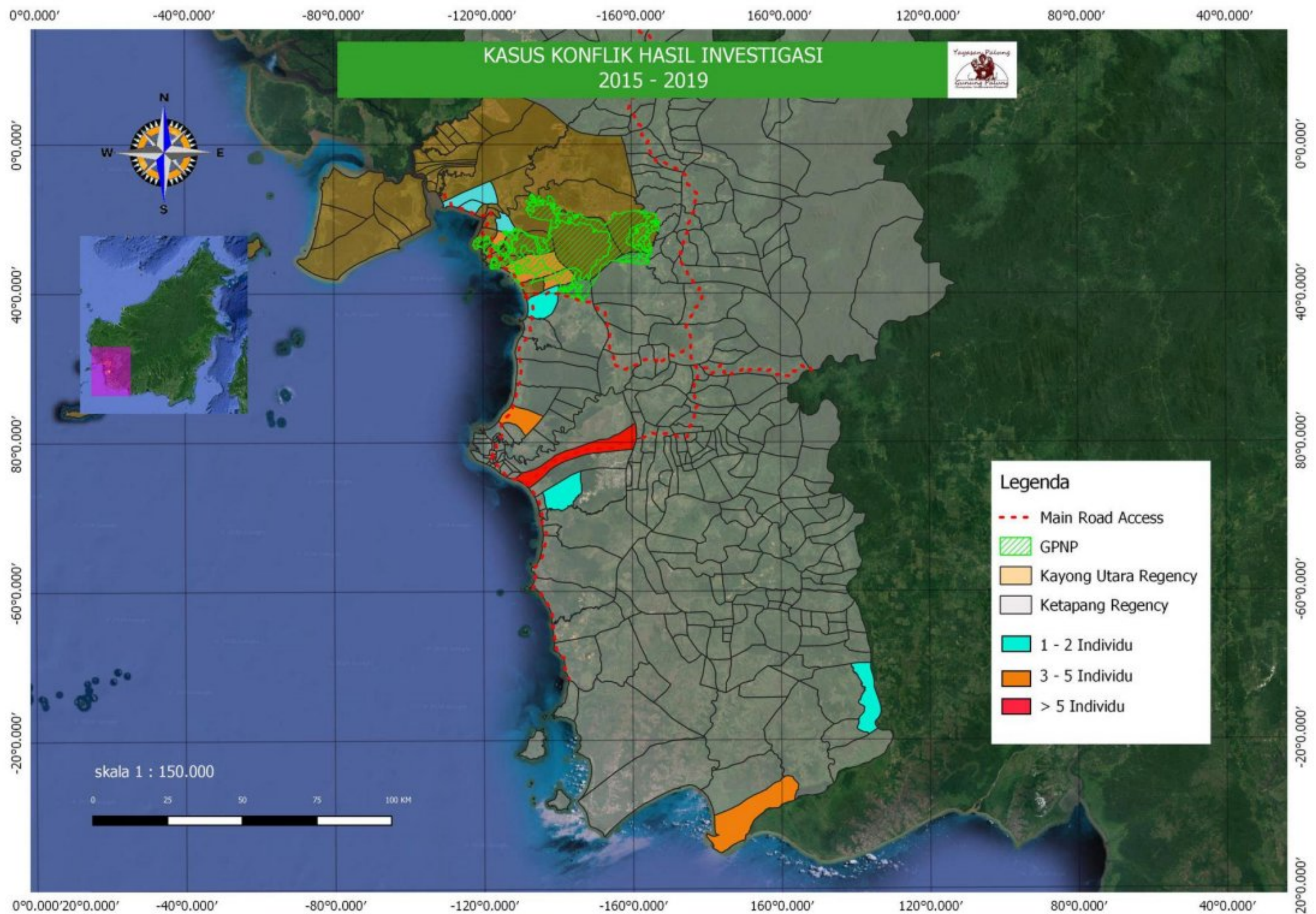
2008 - Current

In 2008, the trend of illegal logging activity began to decline, however, large-scale oil palm plantations and mining began to increase in frequency. People supported these efforts, since they helped to create jobs and advance the regional economy. Large-scale clearing of forest areas began, despite the knowledge that these areas were important habitat for orangutans and other wildlife. Orangutans continued to be displaced from their habitat.

Such rampant land clearing directly results in the decline of orangutan habitat. With the decrease of habitat also comes the reduction of available foods for orangutans to eat. Eventually, this leads to frequent conflicts between orangutans and oil palm plantations, mining, and community gardens. When conflicts occur, it is always the orangutans that end up being harmed, killed or captured. I'm proud to say that between 2008 and now, many orangutans have been successfully rescued from oil palm and mining concessions, and were subsequently translocated to forests that are more suitable for orangutans to live in.



"Map of the distribution of orangutan ownership by village area, 2004-2018"
 Light blue denotes villages with 1-2 cases; orange: 2-5 cases; red: 6-8 cases.



Cases of Human-Orangutan Conflict in Kayong Utara and Ketapang Regencies 2015-2019

Blue: 1-2 cases, orange: 3-5 cases, red: >5 cases.

"In nature nothing exists alone."

- Rachel Carson



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