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## GPOCP September 2024 - Organic Gardening & The Experience of Several Lifetimes

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Dear Friends and Supporters,

It has been an exciting close to the month of September for us, with our conservation managers just returning from a trip to Sri Lanka, where they visited the Sri Lanka Turtle Conservation Project. This was part of a staff exchange that we dreamed up at the Zoos and Aquariums Committing to Conservation (ZACC) conference back in May. We are thrilled to have seen this idea come to fruition, so stay tuned for updates on what the staff learned and experienced while on this trip. And check out our social media pages to see some photos!

In this month's issue of *Code RED* we hear from Edi, our Conservation Field Director, about progress in our organic farming initiatives. Our training on clearing land without burning and making organic fertilizers helps eliminate the need to cut down rainforests to grow crops and is a great way to

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bolster the local economy while also building climate resilience. A win-win-win for people, animals, and the environment!

We also hear from Jay Cogan, a recent graduate of Boston University who has started a year-long stay at Cabang Panti as a volunteer research assistant. Jay's enthusiasm has already been an asset to the project, and we look forward to hearing more about his adventures as the year progresses.

Wishing everyone a happy Fall, and sending our hearts out to anyone impacted by the Hurricane in the American southeast. We hope all our friends and supporters are safe and sound.



Cheryl Knott, PhD  
Executive Director

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

## Creating Stronger and More Resilient Communities Through Organic Farming

*By Edi Rahman, Field Director*

In communities with Village Forests, there is often land outside the bounds of the forest area where the potential of the land has not been fully realized. These are areas without trees, but that are often covered in brush and low vegetation. As part of our support of these communities, we look for opportunities for sustainable livelihood development based on the nature of the land they have available to them, and these areas often have great potential for small scale farming.

There are several reasons why we encourage the development of horticultural plant cultivation in these areas. Many people in village forest areas are farmers of some kind, and thus already have many of the skills and knowledge to make this a success. There is also a market available for horticultural crop products at both the local and district levels. Perhaps most importantly, it prevents further rainforest destruction as people turn to these areas for horticulture instead of cutting down more rainforest. So GPOCP/Yayasan Palung, together with community members, have made horticultural crop demonstration plots in several villages that have Village Forests. To ensure the success and sustainability of this endeavor, we provide training in making organic fertilizers before the plots are installed.



*Workshop on creating organic fertilizer in Rantau Panjang Village.*

### **Organic Fertilizer Production and Horticultural Plant Demonstration Plots in Three Villages**

Organic fertilizers are derived from living matter, such as the remains of plants and animal waste. The benefits of providing organic fertilizer training to farmer groups include reducing farmers' dependence on chemical fertilizers that are bad for the environment and reducing production costs because chemical fertilizers are always getting more and more expensive. From the training we provide, farmers can utilize the materials that are readily available around the village to create organic fertilizers.

In June of this year, we hosted an organic fertilizer production workshop for 24 farmers in Penjajaan Village and Rantau Panjang villages. Mr. Asbandi was the main facilitator of these events and presented the information on how to make both solid and liquid organic fertilizers. In August, we held another such training in Padu Banjar village for 15 farmer participants. Mr. Samsidar, the chairman of LPHD of Padu Banjar Village, was the facilitator of this training event.

The materials for making organic fertilizer that Mr. Samsidar focused on in this training were cow dung, fresh grass, dry grass, banana stalks, rice husks, and EM4 (or Effective Microorganisms which is the mixture of bacteria resulting from the fermentation process). These ingredients are mixed and then allowed to sit for  $\pm$  3 weeks before being applied to the plant. The importance of farmers using organic fertilizers in developing horticultural crop cultivation is to help improve soil quality, increase land productivity and land degradation, maintain soil moisture, and increase the stability of soil particle composition.



*Mr. Asbandi demonstrates how to make organic fertilizer in Penjalaan Village.*

### **Making Horticultural Plant Demonstration Plots**

In the Village Forests that we assist, you will mostly find peat swamp forests, which are very vulnerable to fires, especially in the dry season. One of the reasons for this is that there is still a tendency to clear land by burning since it is perceived as a fast and cost effective method. However, as a result of this strategy, there is a major increase in the risk of forest and land fires spreading out of control and harming countless communities and wildlife. For this reason, we at GPOCP/Yayasan Palung continue to encourage and campaign for Land Clearing Without Burning (PLTB) in horticultural plots. As an example, we created a horticultural crop demonstration plot by clearing land without burning.



*Clearing land without burning for a horticulture demonstration plot in Penjalaan Village.*

In Padu Banjar Village, we created a horticultural plant demonstration plot using grass mulch as a plant bed cover. There are several benefits to this, including preventing farmers from burning land, preventing or slowing grass growth in the bed location, and maintaining soil moisture during the dry season, along with various other benefits. The development of horticultural crops is directly monitored and supervised by the Village Forest Management Unit (LPHD) in each village. GPOCP/Yayasan Palung village forest staff will continue to monitor the progress and development of these horticultural crop demonstration plots, noting the quantity of crops produced and the amount of revenue from sales.



*Clearing and cultivation of no-burn land for the development of horticultural crops in Padu Banjar Village.*

After the training on making organic fertilizers, farmers are encouraged to make horticultural plots around the farmers' residences. There are several types of plants developed including chili, eggplant, long beans, cucumber, corn and more. GPOCP/Yayasan Palung provides the seeds for these plots.

Moving forward, these training workshops will continue in the other village forest areas that we assist, namely Pulau Kumbang, Pemangkat, Nipah Kuning, Batu Barat, Lubuk Batu, and Matan Jaya Villages. Our hope is to

make these communities more economically stable without relying on environmental destruction, and to create greater climate resilience by reducing the risk of wildfires.



GPOCP/Yayasan Palung provides horticultural plant seed support to Village Forest farming groups.

## The Experience of Several Lifetimes

By Jay Cogan, Volunteer Research Assistant

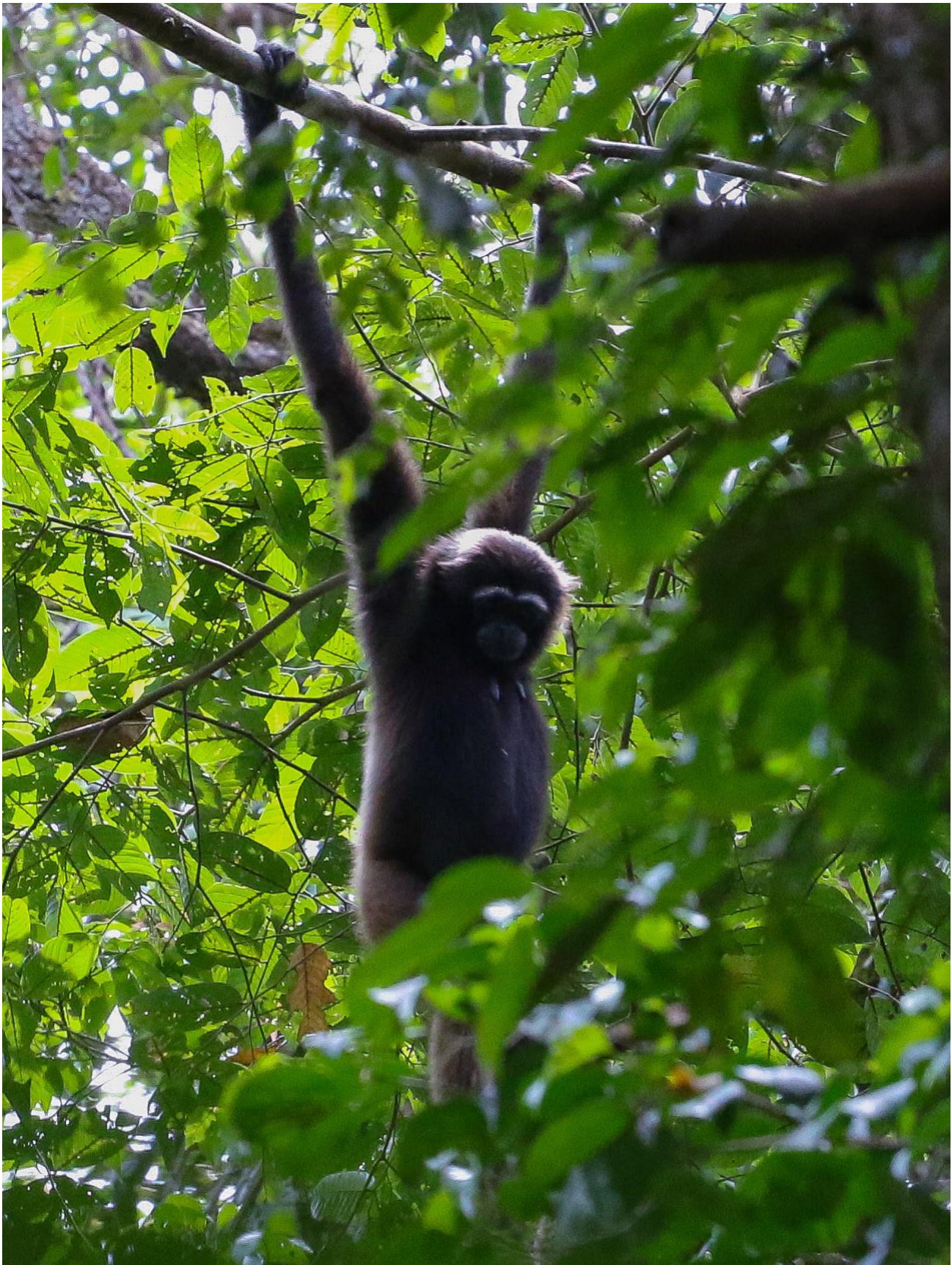
“Is this real life?” was the question repeating over and over again in my head as I watched Alfred, a flanged male orangutan, climb down from his nest in the early morning of my first follow in the field. He paused on the tree trunk 5 meters above the ground, surveying our small group that was assembled to record data on his behavior and location, as well as collect botanical and urine/fecal samples. As he evaluated us for 15 seconds, a sleepy assortment of humans sitting patiently on plastic tarps laid out on the forest floor, I wondered what thoughts were going through his head. Did he recognize those that had followed him in the past? Did he think we were a family? Did he wonder what we were doing? None of those questions were answered, as he continued to the ground and spent the morning foraging for different plants and insects, unconcerned by our presence. The only wonderful answer to my questions was that this was in fact real life.



*The orangutan, Alfred, from Jay's first follow.*

That special day turned out to be even more eventful than I could have imagined. I ended up spotting a group of macaques adeptly leaping from tree to tree in the tall rainforest canopy. Our field manager, Ahmad Rizal, pointed out a gibbon that was swiftly climbing up a tree trunk on our way back to camp. Then, I narrowly avoided danger when I saw a beautiful green pit viper perched on a branch just as I was reaching for it to help pull me through a muddy swamp. I quickly learned the important lesson to always check your surroundings before touching anything. I returned to camp in the late morning, filled with excitement, adrenaline, and gratitude. This was only my second full day in the jungle, and it surpassed my expectations in every way. To this day, almost three months into my full year here, I find myself smiling every time I lay down at night, listening to the assortment of rainforest insects that serenade me to sleep.





*A green pit viper from Jay's first follow, soaking up the rain as it prepares to shed its skin (top); A white-bearded gibbon that Jay photographed later in his time at Cabang Panti (bottom).*

For as long as I can remember, conservation has been my passion. I wanted to lend a voice to the voiceless, provide justice for the innocent, and preserve the natural beauty around us for the generations to come. The feeling of contributing to an impactful conservation project like GPOCP/Yayasan Palung dwarfs any joy I've

experienced before. As I've entered into the field of conservation, it didn't take long for me to realize that these are my people. I'm an extreme introvert, and always found it difficult to find people that I truly connected with. I'm so happy to say that I honestly love each and every person that I've met at the Cabang Panti Research Station, the Rangkong River Research Station, and the rest of the GPOCP/Yayasan Palung organization in Ketapang and Sukadana. Initially equipped only with my smile and a few basic Indonesian words and phrases, I still found it easy to befriend the generous and hard-working people that I've met. As my Indonesian vocabulary expands with the help of many understanding people at camp, I thoroughly enjoy learning more about the lives of my fellow conservationists and sharing more about myself as well.



*The research staff celebrate 30 years of orangutan research at Cabang Panti.*

Perhaps the best day for me to build and strengthen my friendships with others was Indonesian Independence Day on August 17th. The holiday started with a ceremony to honor the country and continued with fun group games into the evening. There was a playful level of competition during our games of charades, musical chairs, and cards. Music was pumping through camp, and there was a smile on everyone's face, especially on those of the proud winners. After dinner, I wandered onto the deck to see what the girls were laughing about, not knowing what I was getting myself into. I was quickly roped into being one of the judges for their dizzy makeup challenge and agreed to be a canvas myself when they needed one more willing face to finish the competition. I removed myself from the role of judge once I felt a bias for my artist, Li (Ari Marlina), and can proudly say that she was declared the winner. Finding ways to integrate myself into the group here is not a challenge like I often find at home. It's a fun opportunity to bond with incredible people. Once again, I was surprised by their generosity when the winners were gifted their prizes at the end of the night. Instead of hoarding away their winnings for themselves, they opened their boxes of delicious snacks and desserts for the entire group to enjoy without a second thought.



*The participants of the dizzy makeup challenge on Indonesian Independence Day.*

One thing that I've discovered about myself while here is that I'm passionate about wildlife photography. I'm excited to shoulder the extra weight of my camera bag with each outing to attempt to capture moments that so few have the chance to experience. I'm certainly no Tim or Russell Laman, just a beginner learning the ropes. But I absolutely love photographing the orangutans, monkeys, gibbons, squirrels, birds, insects, reptiles, spiders, fish, and plants that reside in the jungle. It brings me immense happiness to share my pictures with others at camp and send them home to my friends and family. Finding this creative outlet has been tremendously rewarding. But without a doubt, my most memorable subject so far has been the elusive sun bear. On my first day of searching alone for orangutans, I was lucky enough to have the experience of several lifetimes.



*Jay stops by a tree while following an unflanged male orangutan, Tunjuk.*

I halted my slow walk on a trail when a pair of small birds fluttered into my field of view and perched on the greenery that lines the path. I held my camera up, and they disappeared into the forest before I had the chance to snap a picture. I heard a loud crash off the trail behind me and crept along for a better view. If I didn't stop to try to photograph the birds, I would have walked right by this spectacular opportunity. From 30

meters away, I was able to spot a large black shape by the base of a tree. From 25 meters, I identified it as a sun bear. I crouched there for 10-15 minutes. The bear finished digging for termites, and started walking straight towards me, unaware of my presence because I was off wind. It was the perfect chance for photos, though I was keenly aware that I needed to stay a safe distance away. Once I felt I was close enough, I peeked over the plants, suddenly making eye contact with the bear for less than a second before it turned and fled in the other direction. I slightly regret not being quick enough to photograph its colorful chest as it raised its head to evaluate me, but I'm more appreciative that I was able to soak in that entire moment with my two eyes instead of through a viewfinder. As I admired the sun bear's beauty, it tried to make sense of my unfamiliar appearance and assessed the potential danger that I posed. In that split-second, it felt like we were alone in a jungle teeming with life. It was a unique moment that I wouldn't trade for anything.



*A sun bear from Jay's first solo search for orangutans.*

It's difficult to put into words just how much I've enjoyed my time here. I had high expectations before arriving, and it's blown every single one out of the water. I don't mean to diminish the fact that life is not easy here. Instead, I want to highlight how gratitude makes the challenges feel more manageable. Even after trudging through difficult terrain in hot and humid conditions, working long hours, getting caught in torrential downpours, being swarmed by mosquitos, discovering maggots in my socks, and finding a colony of ants coming up through the floorboards in my room, it's hard not to smile when I think about the experience as a whole. I'm so grateful to those who started the project, those who continue its inspiring work and make me excited to greet them every morning, those who support the program, those who helped me reach this point in my life, and to nature for its immeasurable beauty.



*Jay's photograph of Sandra and her new infant after a nursing session (top); Jay (center) and the research team at camp (bottom)*

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*Management of Cabang Panti Research Station is conducted by the Gunung Palung National Park Office (BTN-GP) in collaboration with GPOCP/YP. Scientific research is carried out in conjunction with the Faculty of Biology at Universitas Nasional (UNAS) and Boston University.*

“Come forth into the light of things, let nature be your teacher.”

— William Wordsworth



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