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## GPOCP February 2025 - Herbs as Medicinal Plants & Orangutans in the Mast

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Dear Friends and Supporters,

I hope this newsletter finds you well. We have heard from some of you wondering if and how the current state of federal funding might be impacting us. We have indeed been impacted, as our current US Fish & Wildlife Service grant has been frozen. This does leave us with a significant unforeseen deficit for the year that we are trying to make up. Any amount that you can contribute will go to helping us to make up for the sudden loss of \$125,000 that we were counting on in 2025 to cover many of our basic operations. Click the red DONATE button to the right to donate online.

In this issue of *Code RED*, we hear from one of our newest staff members, Ayu Zaleha, who is an Assistant Field Officer for our social forestry business groups as part of our Village Forest Program. She tells us about an exciting new avenue that our community members are exploring to diversify their sustainable livelihood income streams.

For our research article this month, I had the pleasure of describing some of the exciting orangutan observations we

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**Join Save Wild  
Orangutans**

**DONATE**

**WE NEED YOUR HELP!** We have to make up for the \$125,000 deposit we will no longer be receiving from USFWS this week due to the

made during the mast fruiting. These periods of plenty cause major transformations, from diets, to ranging, to the social order. These orangutan responses help us understand the broader picture of orangutan adaptations.

Please enjoy our latest news!

Sincerely,



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

freeze on federal grants. Any amount will help us to ensure...

1. All our local staff can get paid.

2. We can continue forest patrolling, preventing logging, hunting, and fires.

3. We can secure legal protection of another 6,000 hectares of forest.

4. We can keep monitoring the health of the orangutan population.

Donate at  
[SaveWildOrangutans.org](http://SaveWildOrangutans.org)  
today!

## Exploring Herbs and Medicinal Plants for Community Wellbeing

*By Ayu Zaleha, Assistant Field Officer for KUPS in our Village Forest Program*

In the villages around Gunung Palung National Park, especially those that we work with, most of the residents are farmers. Throughout the villages, and even in the yards of some community members, there are many plants that can be used as medicine. Commonly referred to as Family Medicinal Plants (TOGA), these include plants like ginger, lemongrass, turmeric, galangal, and fragrant pandanus. These herbal plants are easy for people to cultivate; they can be planted in gardens that require large areas of land but can also be planted right outside of a home in a small area, or in pots, and can even be planted in polybags.

These various types of medicinal plants are currently only used by the community as culinary additives, tossed into common recipes for flavor. People are interested in the potential health benefits of these different herbs and have become curious about the untapped potential all around them. There is an awareness that many of these plants can be used as herbal medicine, herbal drinks and processed as spice powder. There have always been traditional medicines that are part of local cultural heritage, passed down from generation to generation. Many people consume herbal products because they believe that herbs provides considerable health benefits, both for the prevention and treatment of a disease, as well as other purposes, like maintaining fitness and beauty and increasing body stamina.



*The facilitator, Mrs. Ningrum Dwi Hastuti S.TP, M.P, presents information about how to use and process common plants and herbs that can be found around nearby villages.*

While this awareness exists among local people, there is little knowledge about how to actually process the plants for these purposes and create these products themselves. Thus, we have responded to this interest by hosting training activities on the Processing of Herbal Beverage Products, Herbal Medicine, and Food Spices Made from Family Medicinal Plants.

This training activity was held on Friday, the 21st of February in Simpang Hilir District, bringing together people from several villages that we assist. Mrs. Ningrum Dwi Hastuti S.TP, M.P was the facilitator for the event, which was attended by 29 community members from Rantau Panjang Village, Penjataan Village, Nipah Kuning Village, Pemangkat Village and Padu Banjar Village. First, participants learned how to make products through a presentation delivered by the facilitator, and then had the chance to practice making products, most of which are made from medicinal plants that are found widely throughout several villages. From just one day of training, participants produced instant ginger powder (from ginger, sugar/palm, water and cinnamon), healthy stomach herbal medicine (from, kencur, ginger, cinnamon, sugar, lemongrass, pandan leaves, lime, secang wood and water), herbal immune booster (turmeric, water, young coconut water and lemon), and herbal fruit juice (turmeric, ginger, range and honey).



*Participants practice processing herbs for use in a variety of products.*

With this training, we hope that local people throughout the greater Gunung Palung National Park landscape, and near village forests, will continue to develop herbal products, diversifying their income streams and especially enabling more women to be able to contribute to household income. There was great enthusiasm for these new ideas and skills, and we look forward to supporting community members as they explore and grow the market for these products.



Top: Some of the products made during the training event including Herbal Fruit juice (left), a stomach healthy herbal drink (top right), and instant ginger powder (bottom right).  
Bottom: Group photo of the participants, facilitator, and our staff members.

## The Magic of Mast Fruiting in Gunung Palung

*By Cheryl Knott, Executive Director*

Thirty years ago, when I first arrived in Gunung Palung National Park, the forest was thick with the smell of ripening fruit and the largest trees emerged from the canopy resplendent in colors of orange and red. This phenomenon, when many of the tree and liana species fruit simultaneously, is unpredictable but happens every four years or so, providing a bonanza of food for rainforest creatures. This past January, I returned to the Cabang Panti Research Station with my family and once again experienced this remarkable transformation of the forest.





*Top: The setting sun illuminates the ripening seeds of the giant Dipterocarp trees in Gunung Palung National Park. Bottom: Cheryl, followed by her children Russell and Jessica Laman, hike through Gunung Palung National Park. Photos © Tim Laman.*

With the abundance of fruit, orangutans appeared in unusually high numbers. In the two and half weeks that I was there, we saw as many as 10 individual orangutans on a given day. By the end of January, 27 new orangutans had entered the study area! And we only found 5 of the orangutans that usually call Cabang Panti home. It's a bit of mystery where all these orangutans come from, but one possibility is that they normally spend their days in the large expanse of peat swamp that extends outside the study area.



*An unflanged male orangutan feasts on Scaphium seeds. Photo © Tim Laman.*

Among these new arrivals were three flanged males. For years, the dominant male in the area had been Alfred, but when I last saw him in August, his condition had declined. He was notably smaller and weaker, often traveling on the ground and feeding primarily on termites and low-lying vegetation instead of climbing trees. He was last seen on September 15. Then in November, the team sadly discovered the skeleton of a male orangutan that we strongly suspect was Alfred. His disappearance, though, paved the way to a new beginning, as the mast brought in these new males to take advantage of the abundance of fruit. The first such male we saw had a huge throat sac and so we named him *Balon* (balloon). He was surprisingly habituated for a new individual. *Balon* was in excellent condition and impressive! He did bear multiple scars on his cheek pads and lip, attesting to the likely numerous fights he had had with other males.



*Flanged male, Balon (balloon), relaxing in a tree. Note scars on his lip and right cheek pad. Photo © Tim Laman.*

But, then came "Mr. Perfect", as we jokingly called him. He has the most perfect cheek flanges I have ever seen, with no blemishes or scars, just a flat rigid circle around his face. His literally flawless condition, along with his unworn teeth and lighter hair, signaled to us that he was a young, newly flanged male. He long called an extraordinary 15 times the first day we found him! Long calls announce a male's presence to the females, and other males, in the area. Often, males will long call back in response, and charge in the direction of the other male, sometimes resulting in a physical confrontation. But *Balon*, despite being only about 100 meters away from "Mr. Perfect", was not provoked. He remained silent—perhaps a sign of experience in avoiding fights he could possibly lose as he has gotten older.



*"Mr. Perfect" and his flawless cheek pads. Photo © Tim Laman.*

Mast fruiting events allow orangutans to accumulate fat reserves that sustain them during leaner periods. This is when they look their biggest and healthiest. The increase in energy intake also influences female reproductive cycles, raising hormone levels and increasing the chances of ovulation and conception. Often mast fruiting result in new births, and on February 26 I received the news that female Kabar was pregnant again with her second baby after more than 8 years! We hope that Bibi, another female who lost a pregnancy earlier this year, will also conceive during this period of high fruit availability.



*A young orangutan shows interest in the durian fruit that adult female Tari is skillfully opening. Despite the very hard and sharp exterior, the fruit is delicious. Photo © Tim Laman.*

The benefits of mast fruiting even extend to the humans who call this rainforest enclave home. Normally we can't eat the wild fruits of the forest – they are too bitter and have compounds that make them hard to digest. But the mast is different. Each day we'd come back to camp and find bowls of wild fruits on the table, and rice sacks full of durians ready for all to consume. As we followed the orangutans, we gathered fallen mangosteens, *Baccaurea*, *Garcinia*, and durian, enjoying them much as the orangutans did. That simple act, sharing in the abundance of the mast, reinforced our deep connection to these apes and their rainforest home.

This exceptional mid-year visit to Gunung Palung was a reminder of why protecting this ecosystem is so vital. As the forest provides, the orangutans thrive, and we, as stewards of this planet, must ensure this continues for generations to come.



*Enjoying the many durian fruits gathered from the forest. Photo © Tri Wahyu Susanto.*

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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.*

*“When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.”  
—John Muir*



**Our Contact Information**

Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation  
Program

P.O. Box G

1661 Massachusetts Ave

Lexington, MA 02420

1-617-353-7723

<https://www.savegorangutans.org/>

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*Yayasan Palung*

*Jl. Kol. Sugiono, no. 28, RT 013/RW 05 Sampit,*

*Kec. Delta Pawan, Kabupaten Ketapang,*

*Kalimantan Barat 78811, Indonesia*

[www.yayasanpalung.com](http://www.yayasanpalung.com)

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