

PRESS RELEASE

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Bornean orangutans are one step closer to extinction *Zoo's conservation partner says there is still hope*

SEATTLE—The future of orangutans living in Borneo has become more uncertain and more fragile. Based on a recent assessment led by Borneo Futures, scientists from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) have [officially downgraded the status of the orangutans living in Borneo to Critically Endangered](#).



"Sadly, this downgrade is the last step before reaching the grim and irreversible status of Extinct in the Wild," said Marc Ancrenaz, PhD, a scientist who leads orangutan and elephant research in Borneo through [Hutan](#), a Woodland Park Zoo Partner for Wildlife. Given current development plans by the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia, scientists have proven that the number of orangutans will decline by about 80% between 1950 and 2025. "It's abysmal and hard to grasp. To put this in perspective, an 80% decline is like losing four out of five people you know."

Many populations of orangutans already have disappeared in Borneo mainly due to forest destruction, conversion of forests to oil palm plantations and other human activities; many are killed or captured as pets by local community members. At this current rate of decline, many more populations will continue to perish in the near future if a major course change is not made, said Ancrenaz. "If we can make drastic changes on how orangutan habitat is managed, there is still hope to save the species from extinction," explained Ancrenaz.

Orangutans belong to the family Hominidae, which includes all four great apes: gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos and orangutans. Distinct species of orangutans, Bornean and Sumatran, live on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra in Southeast Asia. Orangutans are the largest arboreal animals in the world.

As one of the closest living relatives to humans, orangutans are clever and highly adaptable. It was once believed they could survive in pristine habitats only, however, according to Ancrenaz, orangutans are gaining new survival skills in deeply modified landscapes where the original forests have been replaced with oil palm or acacia plantations. "Remarkably, they're learning how to feed or to build their nests in man-made forests planted with exotic species. They feed on new plant species introduced by humans," said Ancrenaz. In response to human disturbance, orangutans also are changing their behavior. "Although orangutans are naturally active in the daytime, they're raiding crops during the night shift when people are sleeping," added Ancrenaz.

While orangutans are learning to adapt to ever-changing landscapes, they cannot adapt to or survive a major threat: *hunting*. "They are hunted and killed in retaliation for raiding crops or for other reasons," said Ancrenaz. To compound this threat, these great apes are extremely low breeders with birth intervals occurring every six to eight years on average for a single infant. If orangutans are to survive in the future, people must concentrate efforts on learning how to cohabit peacefully in non-protected forests.

"Accredited zoos also play an important role in fighting extinction of species in the wild. They are poised to connect people with wildlife and are a great platform to teach visitors about the threats animals face in the wild. This connection helps foster empathy and inspires behavioral changes needed to address the extinction crisis. Informing people about certified palm oil and certified timber, for example, will lead to better management practices and will increase the chances of survival of species like the orangutan," said Ancrenaz.

Woodland Park Zoo is home to four orangutans. “Our orangutans play an important role as ambassadors for their wild kin in the forests of Borneo and Sumatra. Seeing these extraordinary, personable great apes up close inspires zoo guests to care about wildlife issues in faraway places—and advocate for species survival and habitat preservation,” said Fred Koontz, PhD, Woodland Park Zoo’s vice president of field conservation.

Woodland Park Zoo currently conducts or supports more than 40 field conservation projects taking place in the Pacific Northwest and around the world. In addition to partnering with Hutan on behalf of orangutans and Asian elephants, Woodland Park Zoo partners with [Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program](#) in Borneo, whose focus is to help build a future where orangutans and other wildlife can thrive alongside local villages.

Visit the zoo’s [blog](#) for a video, “Man of the Forest,” courtesy of Borneo Futures.

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