

SUPPORTING ORANGUTAN CONSERVATION

Christine Mallar

"The ultimate goal of all zoo and aquarium-based conservation programs should not simply be to perpetuate captive populations, but rather to conserve animals and their habitats in nature. It is clearly time for zoos and aquariums to not only 'talk the talk' but also 'walk the walk.'"

-Dr. Michael Hutchins, AZA's W.G. Conway Chair in Conservation and Science

As we enter the 21st century, we often make a point to remind our visiting public that zoos have evolved a great deal over the past few decades. Zoos are no longer a place where people go simply to be amused at the antics of caged animals. They have become a place where the average person can become immersed in the habitats of far away places, where they can be educated about animal behavior and ecology, and often a place they visit to feel they are contributing in some small way to the conservation of endangered species. They believe this because zoos seem to have adopted this mission so completely: to be places of education and conservation, as well as recreation. Have we really done this? Many zoos have, and a few have done this very well. However, many zoos claim to participate in "conservation" simply because they participate in Species Survival Plan (SSP®) and still are without any ties to *in situ* conservation projects. Though we all believe strongly that SSP's are critical to the conservation picture, it is an outdated concept that a zoo's role in conservation should only be to maintain captive populations of endangered species. The sheer number of Americans that visit zoos every year should compel us to do more. We have the power to touch millions of people with a strong message of conservation, and should set an example of conservation leadership. We need to convey to the public that we are not simply recreational facilities. Zoos believe in the conservation of endangered species and enable it.

How do we convince our zoo that orangutans and their habitat are a high priority for funding, when there are so many other endangered species in our zoo that need help?

We have entered a critical period for orangutan conservation. They are highly endangered due to poaching and habitat loss. Their habitat has been reduced by more than 80% in the last 20 years, and it is estimated that we have lost about 1/3 of the wild population in the last 4 years. Experts predict that orangutans could be extinct in as little as 10 years. Now is the time we must act in order to make a difference.

Orangutans live in one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in the world. For a hint of the diversity, Borneo and Sumatra represent 1.3% of Indonesia's landmass but supports 10% of its known plant species, 12.5% of its mammals, and 17% of its other vertebrates. Borneo alone has 10,000 to 15,000 species of flowering plants. It is as rich as the whole of Africa, which is 40 times larger. In addition, Borneo has 3000 species of trees, 2000 orchids, and 1000 ferns. One tiny 1.12 hectare Bornean rainforest plot surveyed included 264 tree species, not including its palms, lianas, orchids, ferns and other vegetation. The animal life on Borneo and Sumatra is no less diverse. Borneo alone supports the following species: 222 mammals, 420 birds, 166 snakes, 100 amphibians, and 394 fish, not to mention the invertebrates. Did you know Indonesia has the world's longest list of species threatened with extinction in the world? Many of these life forms are endemic to the islands including proboscis monkeys, hornbills, gibbons, langurs, tigers, rhinos, and orangutans. These same species are our zoos' most beloved and charismatic species. These habitats are excellent candidates for zoo-wide support, as they are home to such a wide array of amazing and endangered species.

How do we know that our conservation dollars can be effective, and how do we know which projects to support?

The SSP© has created the position of Field Advisor (Christine Mallar cmallar@orangutan.com). I am available to help your institution obtain the information they need about where and how to send funding to orangutan conservation projects. I have been involved with researching and recommending projects for the SSP© for a number of years. I have a complete listing of conservation projects and can recommend projects that produce effective results with "staying power". My involvement with a nonprofit orangutan conservation organization, Balikpapan Orangutan Society USA (BOS-USA), provides numerous resources to help with the selection process. For example, the projects that I recommend have already passed through an advisory committee for approval. These committee members are some of the world's leading orangutan authorities, including Dr. Carel van Shaik, Dr. Cheryl Knott, and Dr. Herman Rijksen. Certain minimum criteria have been met by each project, including: commitment of competent on-site personnel, procurement of and compliance with requisite permits and legal approvals, transparent bookkeeping and operations, and presentation of detailed proposals for use of funds.

The Orangutan SSP© can provide your institution with the most recent requests for funds for each project, detailed information on each project's mission and goals, safe ways of getting your money to the projects, and updates on how the money was used. Projects can be matched to your institution's mission and vision. Recommended projects address different facets of orangutan conservation including habitat protection efforts, rehabilitation work, education outreach projects, capacity building efforts, firefighting, and conservation-based research.

My zoo is always complaining that we don't have enough money to support an *in situ* project.

Since the United States dollar is very strong in Indonesia and Malaysia right now, a small amount of money can go a long way in supporting a project's needs. For example, a year's salary for an Indonesian field assistant is approximately \$1500- \$2000. Renovation for large socialization cages at a rehabilitation center that are badly in need of repair costs only \$3500 while as little as \$1000 buys 4 sets of walkie-talkies for field assistants, or enough camping gear and basic equipment to conduct a vital orangutan census for the forests of Sabah. A large amount of money is not needed to become involved.

The public relations value of supporting a "sister" project in the field is very large. Zoo guests enjoy reading articles about how their institution is making an impact in the wild for their favorite species. Promoting your involvement in orangutan conservation through magazine articles and conservation oriented programs can only strengthen your ability to ask visitors for support. The Field Advisor can help you obtain photos and message points to promote your organizational efforts.

There are ways your institution can get involved and support orangutan conservation projects using minimal resources.

An example is to encourage staff to become involved in fundraising for conservation and guide their efforts towards the support of a project your facility has chosen. This can be empowering for your staff, many of whom work at the zoo because they feel strongly about conservation of endangered species and wish they could do more. Here are three examples of staff fundraising for conservation:

- Your institution has chosen an SSP© recommended project that protects valuable orangutan habitat in Borneo. Any zookeeper that cares for Indonesian or Malaysian species could offer public programs. Programs could include lectures about the captive care of zoo species, information about species conservation or behind the scenes tours. These types of programs are doubly beneficial as they educate as well as raise valuable funds.
- A multi-disciplinary committee consisting of educators, keepers, conservation staff and marketing staff could be formed to hold a public event (for example, Orangutan Conservation Day) during zoo hours. Fun activities could be planned for kids such as: craft tables, scavenger hunts for information about species from Borneo and Sumatra, meet-the-keeper talks and special merchandise items. Some ideas to generate revenue could include photographs of zoo animals taken by staff and drawings finger painted by orangutans. Volunteer zoo staff and docents could be involved at each exhibit to help staff

the event. Obtaining a corporate sponsor to fund the day would be beneficial to orangutan conservation while providing the sponsor with a promotional opportunity.

- Hosting school children for lectures about orangutans and conservation. This can be done either at school or the zoo by keepers and/or educators. The school groups could then be encouraged to hold small fundraisers of their own for your designated project. In return they would get a free tour of the zoo or other reward.

For additional fundraising ideas please contact the Field Advisor (Christine Mallar at cmallar@orangutan.com or the Education Advisor, Sandi Linn (sandil@centralfloridazoo.org)).

These projects should not be considered as competition for revenue generating programs already offered at your institution. Initiatives should be chosen carefully to avoid conflicts with established fundraising programs. The new programs should be considered wonderful additions that offer novel angles to encourage zoo guests to visit more often. It promotes a strong sense that their zoo is committed to conservation, and therefore more worthy of their general support. These programs can be marketed easily, generate free publicity for your zoo, and allow your zoo to demonstrate their involvement in conservation without having to spend any money.

The Orangutan SSP® strongly encourages every institutional member to consider a partnership with a “sister” field project that benefits orangutans. The SSP’s goal is to have all participating institutions supporting an orangutan project in the immediate future. Please notify the Field Advisor, Christine Mallar (cmallar@orangutan.com), if your institution provides support to a project. This will allow tracking of and accurate record keeping of your efforts. Appendix A contains a short descriptions of SSP® recommended projects. For in-depth information on each project or further questions contact the Field Advisor Christine Mallar (cmallar@orangutan.com).