Orangutans vs palm oil in Malaysia: setting the record straight
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Interview by HUTAN's Dr. Marc Ancrenaz

The Malaysian palm oil industry has been broadly accused of contributing to the dramatic decline in orangutan populations in Sabah, a state in northern Borneo, over the past 30 years. The industry has staunchly denied these charges and responded with marketing campaigns claiming the opposite: that oil palm plantations can support and nourish the great red apes. The issue came to a head last October at the Orangutan Colloquium held in Kota Kinabalu. There, confronted by orangutan biologists, the palm oil industry pledged to support restoring forest corridors along rivers in order to help facilitate movement of orangutans between remaining forest reserves across seas of oil palm plantations. Attending NGOs agreed that they would need to work with industry to find a balance that would allow the ongoing survival of orangutans in the wild. Nevertheless, the conference was marked by much of the same rhetoric that has characterized most of these meetings — chief palm oil industry officials again made dubious claims about the environmental stewardship of the industry. However, this time, there was at least acknowledgment that palm oil needs to play an active role in conservation.

"The industry wants to be part of the efforts that not only show concern for the environment, but in fact actually take an active part in its conservation," chairman of the Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC), Dato' Lee Yeow Chor, told the conference.

While several environmentalists expressed doubt of the industry's commitment to rainforest conservation, Dr. Marc Ancrenaz, the Co-Founder and Co-Director of HUTAN, the NGO that helped organize the event, was encouraged that the two sides are at least talking. As a follow up to the meeting, and some of the spin that followed, Ancrenaz answered some questions on palm oil in Sabah and the Kinabatangan river basin, where HUTAN focuses its efforts.

HUTAN's Q&A with Dr. Marc Ancrenaz

Do you agree with claims by organisations such as World Growth that the oil palm industry is not directly responsible for the decline of orang-utan

Dr. Ancrenaz: These claims are untrue, irresponsible and are misleading. Genetic studies in Sabah show that orang-utan population have declined by 50 to 90% over the past few decades. This severe decline is due to several causes such as hunting and pet trade, but the foremost reason is forest losses when the forest is cut down and converted to agriculture. In Borneo and Sumatra where wild orang-utans live, forest is primarily converted to palm oil and industrial tree plantations. Forest conversion results in an extreme loss of biodiversity and the destruction of species like the orang-utans. There is no doubt about this.

In this case why does World Growth and others in the palm oil industry make such false claims?

Dr. Marc Ancrenaz: I think this is because you have two "groups", the orang-utan group and the palm oil group. People on both sides are so passionate that it becomes difficult to have an impartial view of the true situation on the ground. The industry is under attack by environmentalists and has adopted a very defensive "greenwashing" approach denying there are the root cause of the problem. NGOs have adopted the opposite strategy called

"blackwashing" and blame the industry for all problems encountered in the field, which is not true either. This situation is very sad since the debate in its current stage cannot move in any direction at all. We all need to work together to identify solutions.

Is this why you worked with the Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC) recently?

Dr. A: Here, I have to begin by paying tribute to the former Director of the Sabah Wildlife Department, the late Datuk Patrick Mahadi Andau. As a Board Member of the Borneo Conservation Trust (BCT), he was approached by the MPOC to develop a project in Sabah and he suggested to look at the status of orang-utans within the palm oil landscape. This survey provided the occasion to deliver precise and immediate information directly to MPOC in order for the industry to incorporate these findings in their land use strategies. Since MPOC opened the door for some collaboration, I felt it was crucial for environmentalist and this industry to sit together and try to find solutions to improve the situation on the ground.

But why look within oil palm plantations

Dr. A: Surveys conducted in 2004 by HUTAN and the Sabah Wildlife Department revealed that there were 11,000 orang-utans in Sabah but an amazing 62% were found outside of Protected Areas in non-protected forests mostly exploited for timber. However nothing was known about orang-utans "inside" oil palm plantations and we wanted to investigate if orang-utans were found inside the palm oil landscape.

So what is the situation within the oil palm landscape in Sabah Dr. Ancrenaz?

Dr. A: Today, oil palm plantations cover a staggering 14,000 square kilometers of Sabah, that's equal to having 20 Singapore in landmass of palm oil! This is why Sabah is the number one producer of Malaysian palm oil. Palms need to be planted in lowlands below 500 meters, unfortunately these lowland forests used to be inhabited by large concentrations of orang-utans and other wildlife before the forest was converted to agriculture. Developing oil palm plantations in lowland habitats is therefore destroying the home of the unique biodiversity found in Borneo. On a more localized scale, we have been studying orang-utans in the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary since 1998. The Sanctuary is home to about 1,000 orang-utans, but this habitat is highly "broken up" in isolated patches of forests that are surrounded by oil palm plantations. We recently realized that young male orang-utans were disappearing from our study site but we didn't have any clue where were they going? Of course, we wanted to investigate this further, and this project conducted under BCT with funding from MPOC gave us the opportunity to investigate this situation in Eastern Sabah.

And what did you find

Dr. A: We found a surprising high number of orang-utan nests within extremely isolated and degraded tree patches located within oil palm plantations and in mangrove forests that have been cut off from mainland forests by the development of oil palm plantations. We estimate that a few hundred individuals are found in the extensive palm oil landscape of Eastern Sabah, namely the watershed of the Kinabatangan, Segama and Sugut Rivers..

Does this mean that the orang-utans have adapted to surviving within palm oil plantations

Dr. A: I want to be absolutely clear here, so that these findings are not misquoted by others again, orang-utans have not adapted to the palm oil landscape and cannot survive within the palm oil landscape in its present condition today. It is equivalent to asking a human to

survive on eating potatoes alone. Just as humans need a variety of food sources for survival and health, so do the orang-utans. In the course of our research in the Kinabatangan we have identified more than 300 different species of plant-life being consumed by the orang-utans in the forest, which is their natural habitat.

But Dr. Ancrenaz, if you found orang-utans within the palm oil landscape does that not mean they are surviving

Dr. A: No, it does not.
We need to consider the ecology of the orang-utans. First, when they reach adulthood, the males are leaving the forests where they have been born in search of new forests to establish their territory and this is what we call "dispersal". However, today the forest is heavily fragmented, cut off and isolated in smaller patches, especially in places like the Kinabatangan floodplain. In Sabah this is mostly due to oil palm plantations. So, the orang-utan has no choice, they take the risk crossing the oil palm landscape looking for forest patches. During their travel in the plantations, they eat the fruits and young leaves of the palm for survival as they search for new forest. They have to walk on the ground and make nest in tree patches that they find. The question is how long does it take for them to find forest patches that are large enough for their survival, a week, a month? Do they make it? Are they getting lost in this vast uniform landscapes? We don't know all the answers to these questions yet.

Why can't they just stay put in the forest they are in, why do they disperse?

Dr. A.: Through dispersal the animals mix their genes and this process prevents inbreeding and other genetic disorders to happen in populations. In addition, small forests fragments can lead to overcrowding and fighting between orang-utans who are competing for scarce food resources. In this case, dispersal is necessary to regulate the number of animals who can survive in isolated forest patches.

So, what now

Dr. A: There is so much we can do right now to help the orang-utans in Sabah and our findings really give the opportunity to the oil palm industry to contribute to the protection of this species after having heavily contributed to its decline in the past. The priority would be for plantations to make serious effort to establish forest corridors throughout their estates to link isolated forests that are still home to orang-utans. However, this approach is site specific. Let me take the Kinabatangan Floodplain as an example. The participants of the recent 2009 Orang-utan Colloquium organized in Kota Kinabalu asked for the establishment of a contiguous corridor of forest for an absolute minimum of 100 meters along the river bank. Such a corridor would go a long way to assisting orang-utan crossing the oil palm landscape when they disperse as well as other wildlife such as the Bornean Elephant which is only found in Sabah and on the border with Indonesian Kalimantan.

Hasn't this been done yet? Much has been written about such contributions within the Kinabatangan by the palm oil industry.

Dr. A: Yes, much has been written and said about Kinabatangan, but in many places you still find palms up to the river banks along the Kinabatangan River, leaving no chance for animals to disperse but going through the plantations. Recreating forest corridors along the river would provide the animals with pathways and food. In addition, these corridors will benefit other wildlife species and will greatly contribute to improve water quality by buffering the negative impacts of agriculture practices on the environment. Some palm companies are already engaged in corridor recreation in their estates, but the amount of land given is

minuscule, and real action has to be taken at the landscape level if we want to secure the future of Kinabatangan overall. The State Government is already taking action via the Sabah Wildlife Department and the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment who are working to create this "Corridor of Life" for the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary. Meanwhile, it is sad that so much resource is allocated for greenwashing activities promoted by organizations like World Growth especially when unfounded claims are continuously made towards promoting the value of orang-utans without trying improving the situation on the ground. Let me be clear on this, what I mean here is that it is high time to solve or at least minimize the problems on the ground in order to increase the chances of orang-utan survival. Stop greenwashing and start putting money into replanting corridors and forest patches in adequate size. As recognized during the Colloquium, there is a general feeling that this industry has taken much from the natural resources and that it is time to give back before the collapse of the ecosystems. At the end, no one argues against the economical value of palm oil and its possible contribution for development. However it is important to do the right thing and then truly settle this debate and issue of sustainable palm oil.

Dr. Marc Ancrenaz is a wildlife biologist with 20 years of experience in Africa, Saudi Arabia and Borneo. He has published numerous articles in peer-reviewed journals such as PLOS Biology, Nature, Animal Conservation, etc and is a reviewer for several scientific journals himself. Dr.. Ancrenaz is the Co-Founder and Co-Director of French Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) HUTAN which is based in the village of Sukau along the Kinabatangan River located on the East Coast of the State of Sabah, Malaysia on the island of Borneo. Since, 1998, HUTAN has been working with the Sabah Wildlife Department on orang-utan conservation issues in the wild. Dr. Ancrenaz is also a member of the Advisory Panel with the Sabah Wildlife Department. He is also a member of the Steering Committee of the Section for Great Apes in the IUCN Species Survival Commission of the Primate Specialist Group.