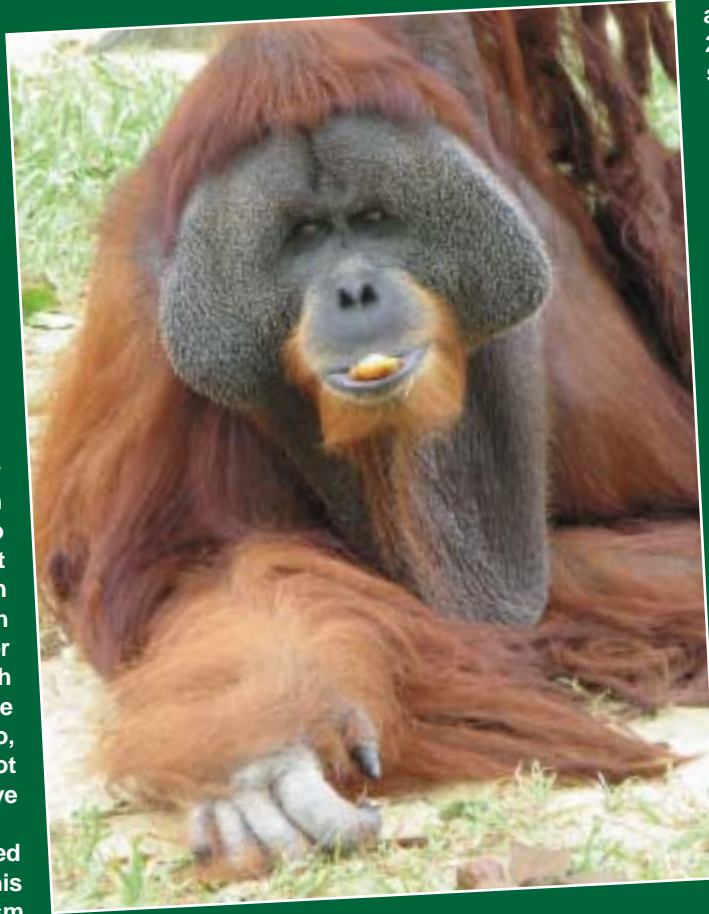


By HERMAN SCHOLZ  
The Flying Dusun Sdn Bhd

**O**RANG Utans (*Pongo pygmaeus*) are amongst the largest primates, and they belong to the three species of apes left in the world (the others being chimpanzee and gorilla). They are the only primates that build a nest every day for the night. They are almost exclusively living in trees, are solitary animals that mature and breed slowly and they prefer undisturbed tropical rainforest. And all this is a big problem, for the rainforests in Sumatra and Borneo, the two locations where orang utans are still found, dwindle at an alarming rate. Tropical timber is still very much sought after, as is the land on which it grows - for plantations, mostly palm oil, to feed an every greedier consumer society. In the last few scattered pockets of forests left the orang utan can hardly survive because there is not enough food available. And they can't meet each other for mating, orang utans simply don't travel through plantations for courtship. It seems that for this age the death knoll has been sounded a long time ago, and on an international level zoologists are not entirely convinced that the orang utan will survive the next 50 years.

There is hope though, and in Sabah concentrated efforts are being made to ensure the survival of this specie of primate. After all, they are also a big tourism



and the Ulu Kalumpang Forest Reserve. By the end of 2007 Sabah will have close to one million hectares (or some 13% of its land mass) of totally protected and untouchable forests, much of it over unbroken territories for orang utans and all the other animals and plants, many unique and endemic (presently Sabah has also 1.1 million hectares of palm oil plantation, much of it on formerly natural orang utan habitat...). This move towards orang utan conservation is a dramatic step forward and in stark contrast to previous reports which only cast gloom on the future of Borneo's flora & fauna. So maybe there is hope? Dr Senthivel K S Nathan, the officer in charge of Sepilok from 1999-2004 and now in charge of the soon to open zoo in Sabah in Kg Ma'ang, Penampang believes now that "even if one day in 50-100 years orang utans should become extinct, Sabah will be the last place for this to happen." Their survival is by no means secured, as Dr Sen elaborates: "Globally, of course, it is still a big question mark, especially when you see what is happening in our neighbouring country", referring to reports of a highway project cutting through Sumatra's forest reserves and orang utans being sold in many Indonesian markets. "With all the measures being put in place I would think that the worst is over, for those in Sabah at least. I am very confident that 10 years from now, if not an increase, at least we will have a stable population. The estimated 12,000-15,000 that we have is a good number biologically speaking. To maintain this is very doable so long as what we do now continues for the next 20 years," says Dr Sen.

# The Future of Orang Utans Is there Hope for their Survival?

attraction... orang utans have given Borneo, and Sabah in particular, a unique global identity, more so than any other wildlife. The Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre in Sandakan draws over 70,000 visitors a year, and in 2004 foreign tourists outnumbered for the first time local visitors, and this by a whopping 10,000! This comes almost exactly 20 years after the centre was officially opened to visitors in 1983. But Sepilok is only a rehabilitation centre where orphaned and pet orang utans are trained to live an independent life in their natural habitat. It is too small to support sufficiently large numbers of the apes for continuous survival, and it is not a zoo either (something you should always remember when visiting Sepilok!). There still must be vast tracks of forests available for them to be released, and where they cannot be disturbed, and Sabah has introduced several measures to slow logging (introduction of low impact logging, sustainable forests management, phasing out of logging and a total cap on logging where orang utans still can be found in large numbers by end of 2007) and ultimately complete conservation of logged over areas so that the forest and its inhabitants can rehabilitate. The areas include Danum Valley, Maliau Basin, the Yayasan Sabah Concession, Dermakot and the whole of Ulu Segama Reserve, the Malua Forest Reserve

