



Proboscis Monkeys in Borneo

A visit to the Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary

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It was not a planned visit and so much more was I astonished at what awaited us: I recently went to the Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary near Sandakan and it was a great surprise and wonderful experience amidst plantations and mangroves alike, a true sanctuary for not only Proboscis monkeys (endemic to Borneo) but also other plant and animal species in Borneo.

The sanctuary is an exemplary illustration of how humans and animals can live alongside each other, with but a small sacrifice from our part: while embarking on oil palm plantation development some 400 acres of mangrove forest, initially also bought for commercial development, were set aside as a unique sanctuary for the equally unique Proboscis monkey

and other animals and plants. The conservation project started spontaneously when the owner of the land learned more about the monkeys and their predicament – struggle for survival in the wild where natural habitats are under heavy pressure and disappear at an alarmingly fast rate.

Few people in their quest for commercial gain pay much attention to the plight of monkeys and other animals on their land, but this plantation owner made a well thought decision and refrained from bulldozing the mangroves for more plantations. What started out as a simple project is now a recognised effort and also a tourist sanctuary where one can spend a night (or better two!) amongst mangroves and their irreplaceable eco system.

Mangroves play a vital role in coastal environments, not only preventing erosion and flooding but also providing spawning grounds and protection for many fish species, alongside with birds and crabs, crocodiles and monkeys, healing plants and traditional building materials and much more. Through their filtering action they also prevent coral reefs off the shore from being suffocated by silt rivers inevitably carry with them; they act as a natural barrier between the sea and the land – in short, mangroves are extremely important areas but unfortunately that is only slowly being recognised and for many mangroves throughout the world it is too late. They have been developed and the price humans pay is heavy.

The Proboscis Monkey - some facts and figures

The Proboscis monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*) is a unique species of primates that is found exclusively on the island of Borneo. With its huge pendulous nose and distinctive pot belly, the male proboscis monkey is one of the most peculiar and bizarre animals in the world. They live mostly in coastal mangrove swamps in groups of up to 30 animals, whereby they are divided into harem groups and bachelor groups. Bachelor groups are never far from harem groups, and mature males within bachelor groups always vie for takeover of a harem – naturally. Thus the alpha male of a harem group with his up to 20 females is on near-constant alert and fights – characterised by display rather than physical fights – are impressive acrobatic feats, accompanied by the curious sounds the males emit and mating in plain view of the contesting male.

The Proboscis monkeys are specialised plant-eaters and their characteristic “potbelly” is due to their huge chambered stomachs, which contain a bacterial soup that helps them digest seeds, leaves (even poisonous ones), and green fruits. They cannot eat sweet fruits and other starch (sugar) containing foods, as this causes deadly bloating from rapid fermentation. Their particular diet, found in large tracts of mainly mangrove and wetland forests makes Proboscis monkeys difficult to rear in captivity. Besides they are prone to stress when kept in artificial habitats.

It is estimated that there are fewer than 7,000 monkeys left throughout Borneo, whereby some 3,000 are found in Malaysian Borneo: some 2,000 monkeys in Sabah and the rest in Sarawak. Kalimantan, or Indonesian Borneo takes up 73% of the entire Borneo but there are less than 4,000 monkeys left (source: WWF). They are highly endangered by human settlement, agriculture, swamp drainage, mining, hunting, shrimp farming, and fire. Little studies have been carried out (Dr Elisabeth Bennett is one of the leading authorities, based in Sarawak) and it seems even less is done to protect their environment. Presently this species is more endangered than the Orang Utan and on a sad last note: if nothing dramatic is done to protect them the Proboscis monkey might be extinct in 10 years from now (the orang utan is predicted to be extinct in 50 years from now ‘only’)...

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