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ON THE FRONT LINES OF HUMAN-ORANGUTAN CONFLICT MITIGATION

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The work of the HOCRU Team provides an on-the-ground solution to tackle human-orangutan conflict. However, it must be noted that the conflict is likely to recur and spread if destruction of the forest continues. Hence, conflict mitigation must be integrated with improved forest management.

The Leuser Landscape in Aceh Province is home to some of nature's best work. This area is known as a biodiversity hotspot, with the rich forest ecosystem serving as habitat for a number of endemic, globally-valued species such as Sumatran Orangutan, elephants, rhinos, and tigers. Unfortunately for the past two decades, these natural assets have been facing persistent destruction because of widespread land conversion, illegal logging, hunting, and poaching. These practices have triggered human-wildlife conflict, especially between Sumatran Orangutan (*Pongo abelii*) and rural communities.

Intervention is needed to minimize conflict and reduce casualties. One of the initiatives to mitigate conflict has been implemented by Yayasan Orangutan Sumatera Lestari-Orangutan Information Centre (YOSL-OIC), a USAID LESTARI Grantee, through the Human-Orangutan Conflict Response Unit (HOCRU). Since March 2016, the HOCRU Team has been operating in the southwest coast of Aceh to rescue, monitor, and translocate orangutans while also training local communities on methods to avoid conflict.

Competition Over Natural Resources

Human-Orangutan conflict is a battle that no one wins, as ultimately both sides suffer. The conflict itself highlights the competition over land and natural resources in the forest. Communities who live within the vicinity of the forest area are rightfully concerned about their livelihoods. Hence orangutans are often perceived of as a threat to crops and food supply. Local villagers sometimes shoot orangutans to protect their crops.

On the other hand, orangutans struggle to survive as palm oil plantations and human activities destroy their forest habitat. YOSL-OIC found that extensive land clearing took place in forest areas in the southwest coast of Aceh, leaving orangutans struggling for survival. They lost their home and food supply, and consequently were forced into village areas to forage for food.

The impact of this conflict on orangutans has been devastating. YOSL-OIC found that several of the orangutans evacuated by the HOCRU Team suffered gunshot injuries, and some of them were found dead. One of the survivors, Lewis, was evacuated from Lawe Cimanok Village in August 2016. While examining Lewis, a doctor found 48 bullets in his body, including 3 in his cheeks, 1 in his back, and 1 in his right thigh. He is also blind due to infection and will not be released back into the wild due to his debilitating condition.

Immediate intervention

The HOCRU Team intervenes to mitigate human-orangutan conflict through various methods.

One of the primary methods is rescue and release. On a recent site visit, the LESTARI team observed how the dedicated HOCRU team members carried a caged orangutan on their backs and walked through swamp forests in order to return the orangutan to a suitable habitat. From April 2016 to January 2017, the team rescued 10 orangutans. 6 of them have been released in Ranto Sialang, Gunung Leuser National Park. The other 4 are still being quarantined, as 3 of them were confiscated from an illegal trade network while the other one is blind.

The team has also spent time collaborating with local communities to mitigate conflict. There are several villagers who voluntarily participate in monitoring activities as well. Locals can take part by reporting to the HOCRU Team if they see lost and isolated orangutans in forest areas. To encourage community participation, the team has set up a Call and SMS Center. From March to December 2016, the team received 17 reports from villagers.

The Call and SMS Center has helped villagers get the support they need to protect their livelihoods from orangutans in an effective and peaceful manner. Iyan from Ujung Padang Village, Bakong Subdistrict, South Aceh District said that he called the center when an orangutan entered his farm. *“The team immediately came to evacuate an orangutan. Because of the team, I feel safe living here. I also know who I can contact if something like this happens again,”* he said.

Another strategy used to involve local communities is through campaigns to raise awareness on

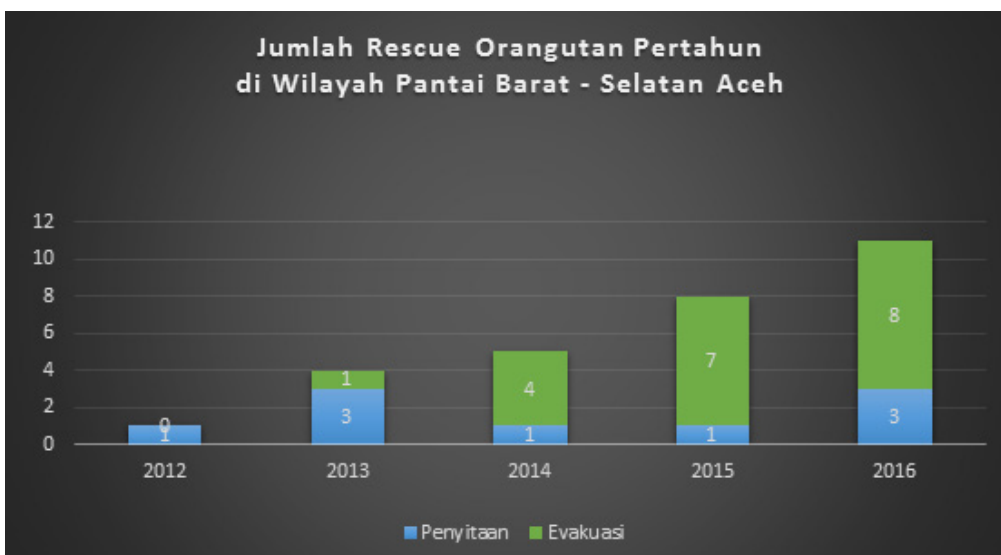


Image: Number of rescued orangutan in the Pantai Barat area, South Aceh.

Foto:

Distributing poster containing information on orangutan as part of a campaign to raise awareness on the importance of protecting orangutans and conserving forests.



the importance of protecting orangutans and conserving forests. Awareness-raising programs were conducted in 9 schools in South Aceh from March to December 2016. The HOCRU Team ensured that the campaigns engaged local figures and community champions, as they yield influence to motivate people for this cause. Future plans will involve integrating human-wildlife conflict mitigation into village planning priorities. Aside from these activities, population monitoring is taking place frequently in Bakongan, East Trumon, East Kluet, and North Kluet.

The work of the HOCRU Team provides an on-the-ground solution to tackle human-orangutan conflict. However, it must be noted that the conflict is likely to recur and spread if destruction of the forest continues. Hence, conflict mitigation must be integrated with improved forest management. Without sustainable forest management, the degradation of Leuser Landscape is inevitable, and the forest may no longer be a home for all.