



SUMATRAN ORANGUTAN CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

ORANGUTAN PROFILE

OU 147; GOBER



GENERAL

Date to SOCP	:	22 th November 2008
Location found	:	Sampan Getek, North Sumatra
Age on arrival	:	elderly
Weight on arrival	:	± 25 kg
Species	:	<i>Pongo abelii</i>

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES:

Gober is an elderly female orangutan, blind in both eyes due to cataracts and with very worn down, orangy-yellow teeth.

BACKGROUND

Gober is an unusual member of the SOCP orangutan community in that she was actually born in the wild in Sampan Getek, captured by SOCP and KSDA (The governments own conservation dept.), and is now living in the quarantine center near Medan. Sampan Getek is an area of rubber plantations about 3 hours north-west of Medan in Langkat District. This area is completely surrounded and cut off from any forests by oil palm plantations. The total area of the rubber plantations is around 3,000 ha, and surveys have found at least 14 orangutans living wild there. These orangutans are long term residents of the area. They are the remains of the population that was there when it was still forested, that have somehow managed to eke out a living in the mixed rubber gardens, bordered by a few fruit trees here and there, some of which were planted by local farmers to mark the boundaries of their gardens.

Gober was captured after she was found to be struggling to survive, as a result of being almost completely blind in both eyes. Probably because of her age, she has developed cataracts in both eyes, meaning that she cannot see to climb or to find food. She was lucky enough to have her young daughter with her, Gaby, who helped to lead her to food but after a while we found that she was increasingly having to travel on the

ground, where she was vulnerable to attack from wild pigs etc, and also increasingly raiding the farmer's fruit crops. Eventually this reached a point where the farmers tolerance of Gober was beginning to wane fast, and so we decided to intervene to save her life...before she either starved completely, or fell from a tree, or was killed by wild pigs or angry farmers.

She was therefore anaesthetised and captured by SOCP veterinarian drh Rachmad in late November 2008 and brought to the SOCP quarantine centre near Medan. Rachmad and his team also tried very hard to catch Gober's daughter, Gaby, who is about 4 years old, but did not manage to do so. Ideally we would have kept the two together and later released Gaby in the more suitable and safer forests of Bukit Tigapuluh National Park with the other SOCP orangutans. Nevertheless, Gaby is already old enough and wise enough look after herself and will survive ok without her mum.

This was the saddest part of the story, the fact that Gober and Gaby will never see each other again. They were both clearly distressed by this. Gaby followed the team to the edge of the area, in the safety of the high tree tops. Meanwhile Gober continued vocalizing "kiss-squeaks" (which orangutans do when they are upset) from within her transport crate all the way to the quarantine. But sometimes we are forced to make tough decisions like this; it was the only way to save them both. If we hadn't done this it is highly likely that Gober would be dead by now, killed by one of the local farmers, and young Gaby for sale on the illegal pet market.

HEALTH

Gober arrived in quarantine late at night and she was immediately transferred from her small transport crate to quarantine isolation cage Block IV/A. She was very afraid and upset and continued kiss squeaking for a long time, but this is hardly surprising for a wild animal, only newly captured and unable to see what is happening.

Health-wise, Gober arrived at the quarantine extremely thin, as a result of the difficulty she had been having for many months in finding enough food. Her spine and ribs were clearly visible and she was also very dehydrated. Her hair was all matted, unkempt and dirty and her stomach all creased and distended. Faecal checks the next morning found large numbers of parasitic worm eggs, including those of *Ancylostoma* sp, and *Strongylus* sp. To treat these parasites we gave her antihelmenthic medicine (ivomec) and also multivitamins (Theragam) all mixed with honey and offered in a paper cup, which she licked clean until completely finished.

It took a while for Gober to get used to being in the cage. For the first 3 days she had a very poor appetite, eating only sugar cane. She struggled to find some of the foods we left with her in and on the cage because she could not see them. It also seemed she was suspicious of many of the fruits we offered her, many of which should would never have seen before. To encourage her and to help her find items, we offered her a lot of very smelly fruits, and sticky fruits, such as Jack Fruit and Kuini with which she almost certainly was familiar since both are grown around Sampan Getek. Even so, it still took her about a week to figure out that the things she could smell were in fact food, using mostly her nose to find the part of the cage where we normally put them.

The next priority after treating her worms was to quickly boost her nutritional status. We continued giving her multivitamins and honey everyday and this seemed to improve her condition a little and to stimulate her appetite for other things.

Because we were still very concerned about her health, we waited 3 months until she had gained weight and settled down in her new home before we anaesthetized her again for a full medical check up on January 29th 2009. This gave us our first opportunity to take a really good look at her eyes. Both clearly have a milky white circle covering the entire pupil, a characteristic sign of cataracts.

Also of interest regarding Gober is that her blood tests show she has immunity to hepatitis B, and hepatitis A, meaning that she must have encountered both diseases in the past. This is highly unusual for a wild Sumatran orangutan, and also even among illegal pet orangutans here. Presumably it is the result of living so closely to people at Sampan Getek. Given that the only other orangutan that SOCP has received that is positive for hepatitis B, Tila, is also from the Sampan Getek area, it is possible that many of the orangutans there may have it. This should not be a major source of concern for Gober or Tila though, since both have already developed immunity to it from a previous exposure.

By the beginning of April it was clear that Gober was already much stronger and fitter, gradually adjusting to her new life and getting used to the sounds and smells of her new surroundings. She was beginning to use the rubber ropes in her cage and could be seen feeling and groping her way around, probably building a detailed mental map in her mind. If she found fruit, she would then retrace her steps and climb up to her old-tyre hammock to eat it. She now eats a variety of the things we offer her but she is still not convinced that milk is something she should be drinking. Since she won't drink from a jug like the other orangutans every day we put some milk in a bowl inside her cage. She always just flips it away and throws the milk on the ground though. Perhaps one day she will decide it's worth drinking it!??



Gober's eye with the milky white pupils visible.



Gober's very tight stomach when she first arrived, a clear sign of malnutrition.

HISTORY AND PERSONALITY

Gober is still very much a wild orangutan, despite having spent most of her life in the mixed rubber and fruit gardens of Sampan Getek, rather than the proper forest. Given the condition of her teeth, which are quite brown and worn, and the fact that wild orangutans regularly reach ages above 40 or even 50 years old, Gober could have been born when this area was still connected to the forests of the nearby Gunung Leuser National Park. Even if Gober herself has never lived in the forest, there is every likelihood that her own mother and father did, before it was isolated and converted to rubber gardens by the local people.

As we know with humans, the elderly often don't respond well to drastic changes in their environment and Gober has had to suffer the additional blows of being blind and being separated from her young daughter. This was a tough decision for us to make, but the only way available at the time to ensure that both had a chance to survive a few more years, and give Gaby a reasonable chance of surviving to adulthood, without ending up as someone's illegal pet.

Given all she has been through, it is not surprising that Gober is not the friendliest of the orangutans at the quarantine towards her keepers. She maintains her wildness and only reluctantly accepts food from the "horrible humans" that come to visit her several times a day. She does seem to be getting better though. She is much more relaxed and does not get nearly as upset nowadays as she did at first. She is also gradually getting used to the foods we are giving her and beginning to accept more of the varieties on offer....although milk is still considered totally out of the question!

We have had a number of discussions with ophthalmologists (eye specialists) concerning Gober. At first we hoped it might be easy to operate and restore her vision. It is after all a common operation in people. However, the advice we have received from the experts is far more cautious than this. Firstly, to remove the damaged lens and replace it with a new artificial one requires specialist equipment to be present at the time of surgery, which is not easily available here. Secondly any operation like this requires intensive post operative treatment, which we cannot assume would be possible with a wild and potentially dangerous adult orangutan...even a blind one! One possible compromise is to simply remove the damaged lens and not replace it. We are advised that this would give her back the ability to see blurry shapes and movements that would be an improvement on her vision now. But this would still require a lot of intensive post-op care and medication on the eyes themselves. Some of the experts have also advised us that on such a clearly elderly orangutan, looking at her tooth condition, it may not be humane to put her through all this extra stress and punishment if she only has a few more years to live anyway.

We are still evaluating all these options, and cannot at this stage be confident which option we might take. In the meantime, we continue to monitor her closely, to build up further her general physical and psychological condition, and to discuss the options with as many experts as we can.

Despite her problems, Gober is very much aware of things going on around her. She now knows her cage inside out and responds to unfamiliar sounds and voices with surprise. She is generally relaxed around more familiar sounds and people though. She is so relaxed in fact that she spends a lot of time just lazing in her old tyre. This is probably where she feels most safe and secure so she prefers to be there. It's also possible that this is simply a function of her age too. She is no longer a 'spring chicken' after all!

PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Gober's story is one of the most unusual and strangest cases we have had. But even so she seems to be doing okay. Her prospects for a return to the wild are virtually non-existent though so we must be resigned to the fact that she will spend the rest of her days in captivity, however many more of those there are.

There is one other totally blind orangutan at the quarantine. Leuser was shot in both eyes and now lives in the long-term cages in the centre of the site. Once we have reached a decision regarding Gober's eyes, and whether to attempt surgery or not, we will then decide if we can introduce Gober and Leuser to each other for companionship. Both are quite aggressive towards people, largely due to the way they have been treated

by them, but there is no reason to assume they would be aggressive to each other. If we do decide to mix them, we will do it very gradually and carefully to minimize any risks of injury. Hopefully we will make a decision regarding this and have something to report by the end of 2009.



Gober standing up in her cage

SUMATRAN ORANGUTANS IN DANGER

Orangutans like Gober are critically endangered. Whilst re-introduction programmes such as the SOCP remain the only hope for hundreds of ex-captive and refugee orangutans, unless further efforts are made to safeguard their habitat, the remaining wild Sumatran orangutans could easily be extinct within a few decades.

The population of orangutans at Sampan Getek, where Gober herself originates from, is doomed to extinction, eventually. We could try and capture all the orangutans there and move them to another forest, but that would involve vast expense (3,000 ha is large, orangutans and their transport crates are very heavy, and it is far from any roads) and also risk serious injury or death to some of the orangutans themselves during capture, e.g. by falling from trees after darting. Another way to look at the population there is to think of them as *“living in the best zoo enclosure in the world”*, surrounded by people and oil palm plantations but living free and finding their own food. All we have to do, theoretically, is try to work with the local communities and persuade them to allow these orangutans to live out their days in peace, and not kill them. This is the option we have chosen to try first at Sampan Getek, but if it fails we may still have to fall back to other options eventually. Only time will tell.

The Bukit Tigapuluh National Park, where all the other SOCP orangutans are released now contains a completely new, free-living population of orangutans in an area from which they disappeared around 150 years ago. In fact, some of the released orangutans have already given birth, and these infants were conceived and born in the wild in Jambi province.

Despite this success, SOCP has to be very active in patrolling the forest to curb any illegal logging or hunting activities. As with many other protected areas in Indonesia there are several saw mills operating around Bukit Tigapuluh National Park and plantations for paper pulp and palm oil constantly threaten the remaining forests in the bufferzone surrounding the park. Indeed, the battle to ensure the integrity of the Park boundaries is by no means easy.

If we are to protect the remaining Sumatran orangutans, we must also make efforts to combat illegal logging and prevent further conversion of the orangutan's forest habitat in Indonesia. Together we must strive to save Sumatra's orangutans and ensure the species has a future.

Thank you for your Support,



Ian Singleton, Ph.D,
Director of Conservation

The Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme is a collaborative project involving:

