



## SUMATRAN ORANGUTAN CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

### ORANGUTAN PROFILE

#### OU 157; SURO



#### GENERAL

Date to SOCP	:	8 <sup>th</sup> January 2008
Location found	:	Born at Bukit Lawang, Gunung Leuser National Park
Age on arrival	:	19 days
Weight on arrival	:	± 0,7 kg (700 gram)
Species	:	<i>Pongo abelii</i>

#### DISTINGUISHING FEATURES:

Still very much a baby, with black patches of skin and light hair covering her body.

#### BACKGROUND

Suro is a very young infant female orangutan. She arrived at the quarantine centre on January 8<sup>th</sup>, from Bukit Lawang, in the Gunung Leuser National Park. Bukit Lawang is the site of the former Bohorok orangutan rehabilitation centre in North Sumatra, that ceased functioning in 1995 when the Minister of Forestry declared that orangutans should no longer be released into areas of forest that already contain wild orangutan populations. This is because no matter how careful you are with quarantine and medical treatment there will always be a risk, however small, of accidentally releasing serious diseases or illnesses to the already critically endangered wild population. Furthermore, as the forests get smaller and smaller the wild orangutans are already forced to compete with each other for increasingly scarce resources. Again, the last thing you want to do in such a situation is add even more orangutans and exacerbate the problem further. These are the issues that forced the closure of the rehabilitation programme at Bukit Lawang and created the need for the current SOCP

project, that reintroduces orangutans in to Bukit Tigapuluh National Park in Jambi Province. There are reliable records from the Dutch colonial era that wild orangutans were found as far south as Jambi and West Sumatra provinces up to at least the 1830s, but by the 1990s they were no longer found there. Today, the southern most orangutan populations on Sumatra are located in what we call the Batang Toru forests, on the west side of the island in North Sumatra province, just south-west of lake Toba. However, there is now a wild population in Jambi again as a result of the SOCP's efforts and infants have already been born there again, to reintroduced females. That makes this new generation the first true Jambi orangutans possibly for more than 150 years!

Even though the Bohorok rehabilitation centre stopped releasing orangutans, there are still a number of older orangutans surviving in the forest around Bukit Lawang that were released there prior to 1995, and some of them have had babies in the wild. These ex-captives are generally known as former rehabilitants and Suro's grandmother, Pesek, was one of them, having been confiscated from her previous owner, the head of immigration in Lhoksumawe in Aceh, back in the 1970's. In April 1997 Pesek gave birth to her first infant, named April by the staff of the centre for obvious reasons. Then on December 20<sup>th</sup> 2008 April herself gave birth to her own first infant, a female named Suro.

That was when the problems began. This was April's first ever pregnancy and at just 11 years old she was still rather young to be a mother. Indeed, she never really got over the child birth, her condition deteriorated and sadly she died on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January, leaving Suro an orphan at just 19 days old. One of the park rangers actually found April lying with newborn Suro beside one of the cages at the old rehabilitation centre, but by then it was too late and she died shortly after.

The park staff then called SOCP and the vets immediately travelled up there to stabilize the young infant and perform an autopsy on poor April. The autopsy did not find anything particularly unusual, except that April was extremely thin and that she had a high intestinal parasite load. The conclusion is therefore that she simply was not in good enough condition with all the parasites to sustain herself through this very difficult and physically demanding period. On top of this, as noted, she was very young to be having a baby.

The infant may also have been premature. Weighing only 0.7 kg, Suro was exceptionally small for an infant orangutan when she eventually arrived at the SOCP quarantine centre. SOCP's director himself also remarked that Suro was by far the tiniest orangutan infant he had ever seen in 20 years working with the species, and that her head was "little bigger than a ducks egg"!! By comparison, the average birth weight of newborn infants in zoos is more than double this, at 1.8 Kg. This means that we also cannot rule out the possibility that Suro may have been born somewhat prematurely, which would also have exacerbated April's problems.

Incidentally, according to the rangers, April's own mother Pesek almost lost April when she was born too, and has always struggled to nurse her own babies properly. In fact, when April was still an infant she was taken from Pesek by another female who proceeded to adopt her. Because of this, April was actually the most successful of all Pesek's infants, all of which died whilst still even younger.

Suro was transferred to the SOCP quarantine center in Sibolangit, near Medan the same day that her mother died and arrived around 7pm. There she was able to get the 24 hour specialist care that she needed.

## HEALTH

During her first days at the quarantine centre the tiny Suro was still quite weak and dehydrated and she made a slight wheezing sound when breathing. Her eyes could not yet focus properly either, but that is normal for infant orangutans during their first weeks of life when they also tend to be extremely cross-eyed as well! The park ranger who accompanied Suro from Bukit Lawang brought a small sarong (a cloth wrap) and a small bottle of milk, but she was not very enthusiastic about dinking at first. After allowing her a quiet night to get used to her new surroundings and new caretakers we tried her again with the baby milk, and after struggling a little with the rubber teat she did finally start to get the hang of it and get some milk into her tiny stomach.

Once she had mastered the bottle, she had to be fed roughly every 2 hours, day and night. This meant she had to sleep in the clinic snuggled up to her caretaker. After a week or two we managed to persuade her that having her own box to sleep in was just as comfortable, with a pillow and towel to hold on to, but still within arms reach of her surrogate mum.



Suro's first sit, April 17<sup>th</sup> 2009



The first teeth.



On January 13<sup>th</sup> 2009, weighing 1 kg



On February 3<sup>th</sup> 2009, with 2 kg

Just a few days after her arrival Suro's appetite began to pick up and she started to gain weight, such that by January 14<sup>th</sup> she had attained 1.2kg. Beside human baby milk, she also received AD Plex (vitamins) every two days. At the beginning of February we gave her a small dose of anti worming medicine to get rid of any intestinal parasites she may have picked up previously and at the end of the month she had finally surpassed normal birth weight, weighing in at a colossal 2.2 kg!! Her wheezy breathing had also disappeared by then, after we had kept her in a warm dry place for the time since her arrival.

On March 8<sup>th</sup>, Suro proudly showed us her first proper eye response as she followed and tracked objects moving around the room. On April 17<sup>th</sup> she managed to sit upright properly for the first time and on 29<sup>th</sup> of the same month her first tooth appeared (upper incisor). The next month she began to show a little interest in some of the soft porridge we offered her, but only a little.

At the time of writing (May 25<sup>th</sup>) she continues to do well. She gets plenty of physical exercise on the small climbing frame and "climbing toys" that the staff have built out of wood and cloth and ropes in their office and is already more enthusiastic about climbing than some of the older orangutans at the centre.

#### HISTORY AND PERSONALITY

Suro is the second baby orangutan from Bukit Lawang that was transferred to SOCP's quarantine center. The other is Ugo Blanco, born to Fitri in 2007, and also orphaned when his mother died just 4 days later. Somewhat ironically, the fact that these two were orphaned so quickly after birth may well have increased their chances of survival to adulthood. Recent results of research at Bukit Lawang and at a similar centre at Sepilok in Sabah, Malaysia, where ex rehabilitant orangutans are fed each day at a set location for tourists to watch them, shows that well over 50% of the babies born there don't survive beyond 3 years of age. This is compared to natural infant mortality amongst wild orangutans of only around 1 or 2 %. The precise reason why the infants don't survive is not yet known. We are trying hard to study this though and suspect it might simply be the fact that these infants do not get enough exposure to wild fruits to learn how to find and eat them properly, since their mothers quickly fill their faces with bananas and milk at a feeding platform, and then spend most of the remainder of the day simply resting or looking for tourists to harass. Further research is needed on this topic before we can draw any real conclusions, but it looks like if Suro and Ugo Blanco had remained with their mums, there's a very good chance that they too would not make it to the age of 3 either. Now that they are in good hands at the quarantine centre, however, there's every reason to expect them to thrive and to be returned once again to the forest in a few years time.

The next major process on that path that Suro has to go through is to understand that she is an orangutan, and not a human baby. Suro is already quite different from the other youngsters at the centre, who are all a year or so older than she is. She is quieter, and she seldom cries or screams. In the early days we were not certain if she would survive or not as she was so weak and slept almost the entire day, but hard work and perseverance has seen her food intake and bodyweight increase and her general activity and health are now about normal.

She is still an infant and needs a lot of attention from her caretakers, Ayub and Hendri, who must also serve as her teachers and help boost her self-confidence. At the beginning of April we made her some toys and rigged things up so she could climb and hang. She still very much enjoys these "play tools" and frequently doesn't want

to stop and leave them. Actually, sometimes we have to remove them ourselves to force her to take a rest, especially after she's had a big drink of milk!!



**Suro with her playing tools, she already loves climbing and hanging**

We have also recently begun the process of showing her what other orangutans are. So far she has only seen them and not yet touched them, but despite this she seems very much to prefer her human caretakers. This will gradually change though, once she realizes these other hairy apes are more fun! She is making steady progress and there is no reason to rush her. She is quite independent already and seems content for the time being to explore her own world and her own abilities. Once she has figured those out it will be time to introduce her to the world of the other orangutans around her.

#### PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

Suro is still a baby, not yet even 6 months old and it will be several years before she is ready to return to a life in the forest. Over the coming years she needs to greatly increase her skills at finding and processing food, at making nests to sleep in and how to climb and navigate in the trees. She also has to learn all the behavioural and social skills she will need as a real wild orangutan. Without her mother this will undoubtedly be harder for her,

but we are confident she will do well and eventually be ready to venture back into the wild. We don't know exactly how long it will take her and how long she will stay in the quarantine centre, but it's likely to be at least until she is around 3 years old and possibly much longer. Ultimately it depends on her. Every orangutan is different, especially those orphaned in their first month of life.

All being well, however, and assuming we can keep her fit and well through her first couple of years, she has an excellent chance of a long and happy life as a wild orangutan.

### SUMATRAN ORANGUTANS IN DANGER

Orangutans like Suro 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 Bukit Tigapuluh National Park, where all 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 Suro and her fellow 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:

