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## **Forests dwindling fast, orangutan face extinction, say activists**

Conservationist have voiced fears that orangutans in Sumatra are facing extinction due to habitat destruction, while some have alleged the animal is badly treated at zoos.

Researchers in Medan, North Sumatra, said that the orangutan population in Sumatra had declined rapidly to about 6,667.

Yayasan Ekosistem Lestari researcher Riswan Zen blamed damage in tropical forests for the rapid decrease in the orangutan population.

He said uncontrolled land conversions, forest fires and unsustainable logging activities had contributed to forest destruction.

Reports in 2007 said at least 35 percent of forests in Aceh were damaged, while 78% of forest area in North Sumatra was threatened. "If the damage keep increasing, orangutans face complete extinction," Riswan told a workshop on 'REDD and orangutans in Sumatra' held in Medan on Thursday.

Riswan said that the population of orangutans in Rawa Tripa, Nagan Raya regency, Aceh, had dropped from 1,000 in 1990 some 280. "Unless something is done about it, they are feared to be extinct within five years."

Yayasan Ekosistem Leuser (YEL) chairman Sofyan Tan expressed the same concern, saying that preserving the orangutan population would a daunting task due to the fact that logging practices were rampant and that the most suitable habitats for orangutans in Sumatra were largely gone.

"It leaves us to decide whether or not Sumatran orangutans will survive in the wild," said Sofyan, adding that the World Conservation Union had included the species on its most endangered list.

In Yogyakarta, the Center for Orangutan Protection (COP) revealed on Thursday that most orangutans in urban conservation centers, including zoos and safari parks, were not sufficiently protected. Some had died because of poor facilities and treatment.

"The assessment that we had from April 2009 to February 2011 in 12 urban conservation centers showed that they generally displayed abnormal and stressful behaviors partly due to bad facilities and bad treatment both from management and visitors," COP director Hardi Baktiantoro said.

He said the observations were based on five main indicators to determine if the orangutans were free from hunger and thirst, from physical discomfort, from illness, from fear and stress and had freedom to express themselves naturally.

Other factors observed included the conditions of their sheds, their environment, privacy, shed ornaments, protection and security. "We also observed if they showed any stereotype behaviors, or behaviors not normally found in their natural habitats," said Hardi, who is also the founder of COP.

Behaviors like vomiting, aggressiveness, self-mutilation, pacing and unusual tongue play, Hardi said, could be indicators that the animals were not happy, poorly treated or under stress.

COP conservation specialist Daniek Hendarto said the assessment was initially done at the five biggest zoos in Indonesia: Surabaya Zoo, Taru Jurug Zoo in Surakarta (Central Java), Gembiraloka Zoo in Yogyakarta, Tamansari Zoo in Bandung (West Java) and Ragunan Zoo in Jakarta.

It was later expanded to Batu Secret Zoo Malang (East Java), Maharani Zoo (Lamongan, East Java), Romensy Recreational Park (Kartasura, Central Java), Wersut Seguni Recreational Park (Kendal, Central Java), Safari Park in Bogor (West Java), Pasuruan (East Java) and Banjarnegara Zoo (Central Java).

“This further showed that orangutans kept in conservation institutions applying expensive entrance fees appeared to be treated much better,” Daniek said.

The assessment also found that clean water facilities for orangutans in most of the zoos were assessed as poor. “Poor facilities had led to the death of Toni, an orangutan at Taru Jurug Zoo,” Daniek said.

COP therefore suggested that zoos and other similar institutions apply higher entrance ticket prices so they would also be better able to take care of the animals. Healthy, well-treated animals, he said, would in turn attract more visitors.

COP also suggested the government close down troubled zoos and transfer the animals to quarantine centers and to ban zoos and other conservation institutions from conducting shows or activities that exploit the animals.