

Orangutans go to school

Nine orangutans, all under two-and-a-half years in age, can be seen playfully hanging from trees and ropes. Nearby, Ahmad Ridho sat on a plank between the branches, looking after them.

The 25-year-old politics and social sciences graduate was training his "students" at the Orangutan Rehabilitation Center's school, run by the Indonesian branch of the International Animal Rescue Foundation (YIARI), in Sungai Awan Kiri village, about 13 kilometers from Ketapang, West Kalimantan.

As YIARI program director Karmele Llano Sánchez approached, Ridho climbed down the tree. His tiny charges followed. "They can't be too far from me," Ridho said. Some were afraid, sporting goose bumps. Two of the apes, male Rocky and female Rikina, clung to each other, slowly moving toward Ridho's legs. "Now I've got to take them back to the tree. At 'baby school' they must accustom themselves to living in the trees," said Ridho. Sánchez helped him carry several orangutans, lifting them up into the branches.

"I'm happy to have local people like Ridho working here. There's been the notion that only white personnel are engaged in orangutan rescue," said Sánchez, a veterinarian from Spain.

The orangutans are trained to get their food in the wild. Ridho hides four kinds of fruits in different locations for the primates to find. "It's not educational to give the fruit directly. They must be trained to feed from nature themselves."

When the animals, who come from Kalimantan and Sumatra, have adapted, they will "graduate" and be released into their original habitats.

Spanning almost 60 hectares, the center has 15 pens, a clinic, a warehouse and an office, apart from the baby school for young orangutans and a forest school for adults. About 60 people, including 25 trainers and 5 veterinarians, work there.

The huge enclosure for the adults holds soaring trees and huge shrubs. "This zone is not open to public, as contact between orangutans and people must be reduced. If they get very intimate with people, they may search for people instead of orangutans when released," Sánchez said.

The shelter, which opened in November 2009, began with 85 orangutans, several of which have since been released. Currently, 70 of the animals are under care: 55 in the adult enclosure, 15 in the sheds. There's no definite timetable for training the apes, according to Sánchez. "We have to make sure that they can find their own food and build their own dens where they rest," she said, pointing to the acacia trees, mangroves, shrubs and weeds in the enclosures.

At the height of the tree canopy, several orangutans were seen sitting amid shady lush green foliage. They will live in the enclosure until ready for release into the wild.

In the clinic, one baby orangutan was seen with an intravenous drip through in its arm, lying in a cradle and hugging a doll. "This baby was diagnosed with typhoid and requires intensive care. There's no such disease in its habitat, so it may have been transmitted by people," Sánchez said.

In the baby quarantine ward, shrieks and cries were heard. Several newly rescued young orangutans were getting checkups before joining their peers in the orangutan shelter.

According to Sánchez, land clearing for large-scale estates has been intense in Ketapang regency, worsening things for the orangutans, whose numbers have been reduced by hunting. Most of the apes rescued were originally raised by local residents and seized during raids.

Every three weeks, foreigners arrive to volunteer at the center. They come from Australia, the US and Europe. Several were seen pushing carts loaded with equipment and tools. "They're seeking the opportunity to contribute to the effort. It's better than coming to Indonesia just for vacationing as tourists," said Sánchez. The volunteers were painting walls and building a wooden bridge. They were forbidden to interact directly with orangutans.

Legiono, 50, a security guard at the center, said that he found three orangutans one day while on duty. "The orangutans broke the lamp in my guard post." The center lacks a complete fence, although a 3-meter-wide ditch helps, Legiono says. "Orangutans can't cross the ditch. It's quite safe," he said.

It seems to work: Orangutans have broken out only once, making it as far as the settlements nearby before local residents contacted the center to bring the animals back unharmed.