

Orangutans in zoos in need of better treatment

Orangutans kept in zoos across Indonesia are in dire need of better treatment, with many showing symptoms of mental illness and distress, an activist of the Center for Orangutan Protection (COP) has said.

The coordinator of the center's conservation division, Daniek Hendarto, said that most of the zoos in the country generally used cages to showcase orangutans to visitors.

"This can be very distressful for the animals. They can behave badly or even dangerously in this situation," Daniek said in Semarang, Central Java, recently.

Research by COP in 2009 on 28 orangutans in zoos in Surabaya (East Java), Surakarta (Central Java), Yogyakarta, Bandung (West Java) and Jakarta revealed that most of the orangutans kept in cages had no access to drinking water, lacked social interaction with other orangutans and had no playing facilities.

Older orangutans may be suffering more misery as they are no longer considered as productive but are still relatively costly in terms of them being sent back to their natural habitat. As a result, many are left in cages with minimal care.

It is because of such conditions, especially for zoos on Java Island that are not the original habitats of orangutans, that the COP is helping to conserve the animals by advising zoos on how to treat them decently.

Such counseling work has been implemented with the Ragunan Zoo in Jakarta and Mangkang Zoo in Semarang.

Distressful symptoms were found in five orangutans kept in Mangkang zoo. Such behavior includes orangutans banging their bodies against walls, deliberately vomiting food and then eating the vomit, drinking their own urine, sleeping constantly or not being active at all.

"Before we started our program here at the end of 2011, all five orangutans were in cages no bigger than 3x3 square meters and were placed in an open, barren exhibition enclosure," said Daniek.

Beli, one of the orangutans, showed destructive behavior by attacking people around him and banging his own body against the wall.

"On one occasion he grabbed my leg and hand. It was extremely difficult to make him release me," Setyono, one of the zoo's animal keepers, said.

According to Setyono, he had to use violence to force the orangutan to release him. "When they become very distressed, they try to escape from the cage by destroying the wall or roof," he added.

Thanks to the hammock and a number of other playing objects provided to the animals since the end of last year, the happiness of the orangutans appeared to improve.

"I have never seen them as happy as they are now. I found the hammock to be really effective," Setyono said.

He also learned that creativity was really important to prevent the orangutans from becoming distressed. Providing them with a hammock, ropes and columns for them to climb on are effective ways to do so.