

## Controversy abounds over orangutan deaths



*Parched: A motorbike rider drives through a vast palm oil plantation in Riau Province. Conservationists have claimed the unchecked expansion of palm oil plantations has made it easy for locals to poach and consume the meat of orangutans in places like Kalimantan, where 691 orangutans were reportedly slaughtered. JP/Ricky Yudhistira* Swiss biologists, veterans of an international program to protect orangutans in Sumatra and Kalimantan, deplored the deaths of several of the animals in Central Kalimantan.

Maria van Noordwijk and her colleagues at the anthropology department at the Irchel University Zurich said that the orangutans' deaths had a lot to do with their shrinking habitats from rampant deforestation and the conversion of virgin forests into palm oil plantations.

"The orangutans might die after losing their habitat because they could not find a new one to live in ... or after they were intentionally poached. And this is a case that the Indonesian authorities should investigate," van Noordwijk told The Jakarta Post recently.

She said that orangutans are native to Aceh, North Sumatra and Kalimantan, including Sabah in East Malaysia.

The species could live only in primary forests or peatlands and a three-member family of orangutans needed at least five hectares of virgin forests to live in with adequate food.

"A mother orangutan taking care of her child for many years will die when they are driven away from their habitat or when they fail to find a new habitat," Noordwijk said.

The Center for Orangutan Protection (COP), a non-governmental organization focusing on efforts to protect this endangered species, condemned recent killings and called on the police to investigate. The COP placed blame with a local palm oil company after the remains of four orangutans were found in the concession area of PT Sarana Titian Permata 2, one of the companies under the Wilmar International group, in Central Kalimantan. So far, at least five people, including a Malaysian citizen, have been declared suspects in the case.

Palm oil producers, however, denied involvement in the death of the orangutans. They alleged that accusations made by non-governmental organizations were merely meant to destroy the company's reputation.

Chairman of the Forum for Development of Sustainable Strategic Plantations Ahmad Manggabarani said the campaign was part of conspiracy to discredit palm oil business, which is currently booming in Indonesia.

"The killing of orangutans is really old news. The issue was brought up again by certain parties, both at home and abroad, to kill the palm oil industry, which has become a competitor of vegetable oil producers in Europe and United States," he said.