



PRESS RELEASE

From PanEco Foundation (paneco.ch)

New public - private partnership to secure future for World's rarest great ape and its habitat

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The Swiss based PanEco foundation and energy company, PT North Sumatra Hydro Energy, are joining forces with the Government of Indonesia to safeguard the future of the recently described Tapanuli orangutan species, and its habitat the Batang Toru Ecosystem in the Tapanuli region of North Sumatra, Indonesia. Their goal is to implement a comprehensive new conservation strategy for more than 200,000 ha of the new great ape species' forest habitat, via a new multi-stakeholder approach. The new strategy will include the creation of forest corridors to connect fragmented habitat areas, restoration of cleared forests, and upgrading protection of currently unprotected areas.

Context

The Swiss-based environmental organisation, the PanEco Foundation has a long history of nature conservation and sustainable development in Indonesia. Its President, biologist Regina Frey, first worked in the country as co-founder of Sumatra's first orangutan rehabilitation centre, at Bohorok, in 1973. In 1999, PanEco teamed up with its local Indonesian partner, Yayasan Ekosistem Lestari (YEL; Sustainable Ecosystem Foundation), and the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry's Directorate General for Conservation of Natural Resources and Ecosystems to establish the Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme (SOCP). The SOCP tackles all aspects of orangutan conservation in Sumatra, from the reintroduction of confiscated illegal pet orangutans to the monitoring of remaining wild populations and efforts to protect their habitat, including in the Batang Toru Ecosystem, home of the new Tapanuli orangutan species.

Through the SOCP, YEL and PanEco have been working in the Batang Toru area since first surveying the orangutan population in the early 2000's and, in 2006, YEL set up a field monitoring post to encourage further research on the orangutans and other species.

One result of this work, and collaboration with scientists from within Indonesia and abroad, was the description in November 2017 of the Tapanuli orangutan (*Pongo tapanuliensis*) as an entirely new species of orangutan, genetically distinct from Sumatran orangutans (*Pongo abelii*) further north in the island, and the first new species of great ape to be described for nearly 100 years. Sadly, however, with surveys suggesting there are fewer than 800 Tapanuli orangutans surviving in the wild today, the new species is also listed by the IUCN as Critically Endangered on their Red List of Threatened Species, and became overnight probably the most endangered great ape species in the world.

Orangutans versus green infrastructure

There has been considerable international concern over plans by PT North Sumatra Hydro Energy to build a new hydro electricity generating plant in the southern regions of the Tapanuli orangutan's habitat, along the Batang Toru river valley.

The proposed scheme will generate 510 MW of energy in a region plagued by power outages and replace the use of diesel power, with the potential to realise as much as 1.6 million tons per year in carbon emission reductions, which is high on the Indonesian government's priority list as part of its commitments to mitigating global climate change.

But, its construction will require the permanent loss of at least 130ha of Tapanuli orangutan habitat, which has led to global concern and ongoing campaigns against its development, both within Indonesia and internationally.

Change of strategy - new potential

These protests have resulted in considerable pressure from both sides of the debate, but Indonesia's government remains committed to the project, its international commitments to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, and construction of the project is already well advanced.

With this in mind, the PanEco Foundation is willing to engage with the government and the company to try to mitigate the project's direct impacts on the forest and the orangutans and to develop a major new comprehensive conservation strategy for the entire Batang Toru Ecosystem.

The new hydro electric scheme is just one of many threats to these forests and the new ape species. Others include mining, other planned and existing energy projects, illegal logging and encroachment.

A strong commitment for Batang Toru

NSHE and PanEco have therefore agreed to end their differences and enter a new partnership with a comprehensive long-term perspective, to safeguard the entire Batang Toru Ecosystem and a future for the Tapanuli orangutan. To this end, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been signed today, fully endorsed by the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry's Directorate General for Conservation of Natural Resources and Ecosystems.

The new conservation strategy will also engage with other stakeholders in the region, including the local governments, the private sector, and the Working Group on Sustainable Management of the Batang Toru Landscape, a group of Indonesian NGOs and local communities coordinated by the Institut Pertanian Bogor (Bogor Agricultural Institute).

With the new MOU, PT NSHE, PanEco and the Government of Indonesia are committed to the following measures:

- Building of habitat corridors to reconnect the already fragmented population of Tapanuli orangutans.
- Maintaining connectivity in areas where orangutan populations are at risk of being fragmented by disturbance due to construction or maintenance of the hydro power plant.
- Restoring disturbed or destroyed forests to their former condition.
- Halting encroachment and forest loss within the company's Exploration Zone and beyond.
- Adopting a zero-tolerance policy and strategy for law enforcement against anyone hunting, killing, harassing or otherwise disturbing orangutans and other species within the PLTA exploration zone and beyond.

- Raising the protected status of currently unprotected forests within the Batang Toru Ecosystem

It is anticipated, that with the new MOU, and the full support of the government of Indonesia, both parties will be able to achieve far more in securing a long term future of the new Tapanuli orangutan species, their incredibly rich and precious rainforest habitat, and the myriad of other rare and threatened species that share it, than either would ever have been able to acting alone.

PanEco's President, Ms. Regina Frey, commented, "All over the world, there's a strong trend and public pressure to replace 'Business as Usual' with new, more sustainable approaches to development. This collaboration offers an opportunity to develop model solutions for future conflicts between economics and nature conservation elsewhere in the world."

Wiratno, Director General for Conservation of Natural Resources and Ecosystems, KLHK comments: "I applaud this new partnership and will do my very best to endorse it fully by contributing to the solution of administrative and technical issues. I appreciate the inclusive spirit of this collaboration, embracing the government at all levels, NGOs, community groups and their local wisdom on environment, including wildlife, scientists and corporates in a multi-stakeholder approach."

Professor Carel van Schaik, a world-renowned expert on orangutans, and PanEco board member, added, "Even without this new-hydro energy project, with less than 800 Tapanuli orangutans remaining, in an already highly fragmented population, the prospects for the species' survival looks bleak. With the Government of Indonesia and now PT NSHE on their side, there is enormous potential for a major new conservation strategy that will ensure their protection, and that of their entire Batang Toru Ecosystem habitat, long into the future."

Supplementary information on Tapanuli orangutans and the SOCP:

- The Tapanuli orangutan (*Pongo tapanuliensis*) was first described in November 2017 as a new species of orangutan and the first new species of great ape to be described in nearly 100 years. (see Nater et al., 2017).
- It is genetically distinct from its neighbours further north on the island, the Sumatran orangutan (*Pongo abelii*) and those on nearby Borneo (*Pongo pygmaeus*).
- Less than 800 Tapanuli orangutans remain in the wild, in the forests of the Batang Toru Ecosystem in the Tapanuli region of North Sumatra, Indonesia.
- All three orangutan species are listed as Critically Endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in the Red List of Threatened Species.
- The Tapanuli orangutan is also listed as one of the 25 World's Most Endangered Primates by the IUCN's Primate Specialist Group.

The Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme (SOCP)

The SOCP (www.sumatranorangutan.org) is a collaborative programme of the Swiss-based PanEco Foundation (www.paneco.ch), its partner NGO in Indonesia Yayasan Ekosistem Lestari (YEL: Sustainable Ecosystem Foundation; www.yel.or.id), and the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry's Directorate General for Conservation of Natural Resources and Ecosystems (Ditjen KSDAE (<http://ksdae.menlhk.go.id>)).

The SOCP is active in all aspects of Sumatran orangutan conservation including :

- Confiscation, rehabilitation, and reintroduction of captive orangutans to form new viable wild populations.
- Research, surveys and monitoring of wild orangutan populations.
- Habitat protection and restoration.
- Environmental education and awareness raising.

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