

KERATAN AKHBAR



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PROTECTING ORANGUTANS

SEPILOK CENTRE MUST HEED THE RULES

THE Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre (SORC) in Sabah is often written about in the Malaysian media. However, not many know there are various practices at the centre which negatively impact the orangutans there.

The centre has been portrayed as a beacon of light for orangutan conservation in Malaysia, including by Primary Industries Minister Teresa Kok.

This is a myth. Often false and misleading messages are sent out by the centre and the Sabah Wildlife Department, and printed in the media. Malaysians obtain false information on real orangutan conservation.

The media is blameless as there is very little awareness about the centre until now.

It is difficult for caring conservationists to speak up as their work may be affected by state governments if they do.

SORC is owned and managed by the Sabah state government. According to the website of the Sabah Wildlife Department, "The aim of Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre is to return orphaned, injured or displaced orangutans back to the wild."

The centre is at the edge of the Sepilok-Kabili forest reserve where the SORC's ex-rehabilitant (released into the forest after completion of rehabilitation) orangutans co-range with wild orangutans (born at the forest reserve and not ex-rehabilitants). SORC is open to the public for

tourism purposes. It has twice-a-day outdoor feeding sessions (10am and 3pm) where tourists can pay to enter and view orangutans feeding on a platform.

During visiting hours, tourists are also able to view orangutans at the outdoor nursery area, while supposedly undergoing rehabilitation.

The tourism at SORC, however, does not abide by the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Best Practice Guidelines for Great Ape Tourism and this impacts the apes.

Consequently, experts recommend that no tourism be allowed with rehabilitant orangutans that are eligible for or already returned to forest life (Rosen and Byers, 2002).

No tourism should be allowed with orangutans in rehabilitation centres, or in forests where rehabilitants range (Rosen and Byers, 2002; Russon, Susilo and Russell, 2004).

Ex-rehabilitant orangutans have been released into the Sepilok-Kabili forest reserve while rehabilitant orangutans are also known to roam around SORC.

Exposing ex-rehabilitant/rehabilitant and wild orangutans to large numbers of people such as at the centre and without abiding by the IUCN best practices increase habituation to humans among these apes.

Human habituation can seriously affect orangutans, including hampering the orangutan's



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chances of living independently in a forest, and increasing their susceptibility to poachers, among other effects.

To make matters worse, the centre allows rotating volunteers to be part of the rehabilitation process.

These individuals pay to volunteer at SORC for four weeks and there is a maximum of 12 people in a group.

Habituation to humans also inevitably leads to increase in instances of contact or close prox-

imity between tourists and orangutans at the centre and this does not only escalate disease transmission risks (such as hepatitis and influenza) among humans and orangutans but also exposes both to physical attacks.

In 2017, an ex-rehabilitant orangutan attacked a tourist.

Although there are attempts to control crowds by employees during feeding sessions at the centre, it is a challenge to control movements of habituated orangutans and a challenge for

workers to be at all areas during visiting hours.

We have previously received reports of orangutans taking tourists' belongings and have been told of "problem" orangutans vanishing from the centre. Sabah state officials have never commented when they were asked about this.

ZULKIFLI DAUD

SEPILOKISU
Office coordinator,
Friends of the Orangutans Malaysia