



# AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

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A survival safari in Malaysian Borneo that leaves an indelible mark

*By Captain Robin Evans, BALPA member and senior Log contributor*

n approach into Kuala Lumpur, palm oil trees stretch for miles where rainforest once stood.

Reconciling economic growth and natural resources is tricky, and here's a prime upset between man and nature in equatorial regions. Palm oil is lucrative for industrious Malaysia; almost half of the oil imported into the EU satisfies conditions for motor biofuel blending, but more sits on your kitchen and bathroom shelves, in cosmetics, soaps, biscuits, peanut butter and so on. Iceland has just become the first UK supermarket to commit to removing palm oil from sale by the end of the year.

## Man of the forest

With rainforest being repurposed rapidly, orangutans are being forced into conflict with the locals, terrorised as pests or kept as pets. Orangutan is a conjunction of the Malay words *orang* (man) and *hutan* (forest). The International Red List of Threatened Species classifies them as 'critically endangered', the final stop before 'extinct in the wild'.

I'm in a small reserve outside state capital Kota Kinabalu. Financed directly by visitors, the population of this reserve is semi-wild – displaced orphans smarting from human contact. Some are missing fingers; others have been chained, beaten or burnt. They also don't get on with mosquito repellent or human viruses; direct contact with *orangs* is so often toxic.

There's silence while we await the arrival of the dinner guests. The first indication is the sound of youngsters crashing about, their dark-auburn fur blending well with the canopy. They tear around the rainforest with the eyes of impish children knowingly about to test boundaries. Dangling from a struggling bough, one lets go, as if anticipating the gasp of horror from the onlookers below. In a flash, a skinny arm extends onto a creeper, narrowly averting ground contact. They are the most unlikely and likable pot-bellied, aerial livewires.

In contrast, the adults amble in slow formation along ropes leading from the treetops to a fruity buffet. At ground level, their movements appear even slower and more deliberate. They build nightly nests in the canopy, traversing huge distances at height. Where their progress is blocked by sections of felled forest, attempts are being made to use cargo strapping to span logging tracks and reconnect isolated pockets. The orangutans have a morose demeanour, as



if aware of a precarious future. The males particularly so, dangling matted dreadlocks. You can't get too close, but their eyes have a look that evokes deep thought and pity in the beholder.

The rainforest is soaking everything with a misty sheen. There's nothing quite as gut-wrenching as watching a small orphan fold itself into a matted ball and appear to go to sleep clutching the boot of a ranger. Another orphan munches a banana from slender, grasping toes, a thin arm draped across the back of another ranger. Never has the approximate 97% DNA similarity between *orang* and orangutan seemed more obvious; never has 3% seemed so small – or huge. It's minimalist rainforest rehabilitation: success will be when they dissolve quietly into the jungle, not history, for the last time.

### Turtle time

On the eastern coast of a vast, steaming interior, coastal shanties rub shoulders with the polished minarets of Sandakan. The nearby jungle conceals scars of man's inhumanity to man, rather than just to beasts. Not far away, a memorial sits on the site of a former prisoner of war camp, the starting point of the 1945 Sandakan Death Marches. More than 2,000 Allied personnel, many Australian, died in similar circumstances to those who endured the enforced labour and starvation of the Burma Railway.

Sandakan is the gateway to a small-scale, but authentic, conservation programme for the aquatic counterpart of the orangutan. The two native populations of the Turtle Islands Marine Park – half a dozen scientists and hundreds of nightly nesting sea turtles – tolerate limited visitors. There's a fine balance between funding and protecting, hence a cap on numbers: in the planning, this was the first part to be secured. Tourism funds this work directly: the Malaysian ringgit goes to source, and is not lost in layers of subterfuge. The conditions: one night and one turtle only.

All signs of dry land soon disappear over the horizon on the boat ride towards the Philippines. A skeletal flotilla of deserted wooden fishing platforms towers out of the water; a tiny smudge of green



begins to resolve in the distance. Turtle Island is an unashamedly rugged venue, the interior thick with creepers and infrastructure being slowly overtaken by nature. The beaches are webbed with huge flipper trails and craters. Sea turtles aren't picky and will adopt the first hole they find for their valuable cargo. I lie in one with limbs outstretched and remain beneath beach level.

By day, the occasional hatchling erupts from the sand and races into the water. Thanks to predation, fishing and pollution, the odds of them surviving to return and repeat the process are slender. As a reminder, a handful of dead turtles spin in the surf, picked at by fish. This is prehistoric biology that man has only recently toppled. In urbanised areas, hatchlings march towards the light: roads, housing and swimming pools.

By night, a handful of guests regroup in a traditional Borneo longhouse. We're on tenterhooks awaiting our summons from the rangers. It's a wild night and the wind tears at the palms outside, the bulbs dimming periodically as the power struggles. We've been prepped with the right words – and finally they come: "Turtle time!

Turtle time!" We race around trees, following shadowy torchlight ahead. There's a contrast of stinging, wind-whipped sand and warm rain. I'd imagined our leathery heroine lumbering towards an immaculate palm, but this plucky green turtle has picked the scrubbiest stretch of beach on a murky night. She's a huge, battered wheelbarrow, with glassy, trancelike eyes. Already tagged, she's a repeat customer, 1.3m long and weighing about 140kgs.

Soon, 114 ping-pong ball eggs are collected for the hatchery. Protection has to be carefully managed: many reptilian egg



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species are initially gender neutral, higher temperatures increasing the female proportion. There's a sense of loading the dice for a fighting chance, acknowledging the wider food chain, too. Then the highlight: we release an earlier batch of hatchlings, excitedly churning for the off. It's important this first solo trip is uninterrupted, as it is thought to imprint the sense that permits a lifetime of navigation back home... sound familiar? Like an army of clockwork

bath toys, they march down the beach, vanishing into the dark surf. Despite the power of instinct and evolution, it is almost impossible to believe that most will not survive to return.

### Breaking the cycle

Genuine protection involves scientific staff in balance with tourism. Locals should be involved and shown that species are worth more safeguarded than as commodities, poached delicacies or vermin. Any protection method would only be a means to an end; if long-term conservation works, hatcheries or forest reserves will not be needed.

True conservation also keeps records: each morning at Turtle Island, a board displays the hefty overnight census. Alas, there's another tally: armfuls of bleached plastic ejected from the waters overnight. Departing guests help collect and remove it – but are they affected enough to break the cycle at source? We're only just starting to reduce our use of plastic bags, cosmetic microbeads and drinking straws. The

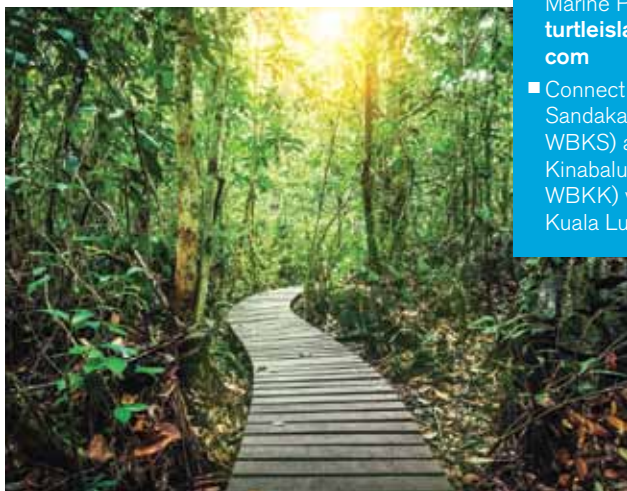
beaches of glossy, coastal hotels often appear pristine because they're swept before dawn.

The return journey to Borneo brings thoughts of the conflict unfolding over disputed territorial waters in the South China Sea. Five nations are squabbling over sovereignty of the reefs inside the 'Nine-Dash Line'. One is the aptly named Fiery Cross Reef; when does a reef become a hastily dredged and aggressively defended Chinese missile base?

You don't tend to forget poignant meetings such as these: I leave buoyed, not depressed. No disrespect to Malaysian street food, temples or beaches (all impressive), but these are reliable constants. Malaysian travel has perhaps taken a knock because of the triple whammy of MH17, MH370 and AirAsia 8501, after which our industry is a little sadder and much wiser. Encountering turtles and orangutans feels much the same. If you have the good fortune to see one of these amazing animals, their plaintive eyes seem to suggest we could all look after stuff a little better. ■

### HANDY INFORMATION

- Sepilok Orangutan Sanctuary [www.orangutan-appeal.org.uk](http://www.orangutan-appeal.org.uk)
- Crystal Quest – Turtle Islands Marine Park [turtleislandborneo.com](http://turtleislandborneo.com)
- Connect to Sandakan (SDK/WBKS) and Kota Kinabalu (BKI/WBKK) via Kuala Lumpur



#### IMAGES FROM TOP FAR LEFT:

Orangutan in the trees; green sea turtle; jungle passage, Borneo; Bohey Dulang, Sabah; newborn sea turtle; turtle eggs in a hatchery sand hole