

The young male orang utan crossing the Resang River along a rope bridge built in 2003 by the Sabah Wildlife Department and Kinabatangan Orang Utan Conservation Project.



Yes – orang utans are using rope bridges to get across rivers

KINABATANGAN: The orang utan bridge project to reconnect isolated orang utan populations within the Kinabatangan has been successful going by photographic evidence.

"Over the years, there have been numerous local eye witness reports of orang utans using these rope bridges but this is the first time we have received photographic evidence which clearly showed a young male orang utan using the first rope bridge we constructed in 2003 to cross over Sungai Resang, a small tributary of Kinabatangan, said primatologist, Dr Isabelle Lackman, Co-Director of the Kinabatangan orang utan Conservation Project (KOC) in a press statement.

A member of the local community, Ajirun Osman @ Aji, took the pictures in February. According to him, the young male orang utan spent about 20 minutes at the rope bridge tree before actually deciding to cross. Once he decided, he did so very fast going over in about three minutes from the Pangli Forest Reserve into Lot 1 of the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary," said Ajirun.

Dr Lackman noted that in the past orang utans would have used tall old growth forest as "natural bridges" over small rivers. However at present, the orang utans no longer have this luxury since most trees have been logged.

"Today the orang utan is facing more human made obstacles such as illegal planting for oil palm all the way down to the river bank leaving no riparian reserve although these reserves are required by law under the Environment Protection Enactment of 2002 as well as the Water Resources Enactment of 1998," said Dr Lackman.

Furthermore, oil palm plantations also contribute to isolation of orang utan populations when they build large drains (sizes of small rivers) to draw off excess water from

the cultivation of palm oil. Unfortunately, all the great ape species, which include the orang utan, are unable to swim.

To reconnect isolated populations, KOC which was established by the Sabah Wildlife Department and the French Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) Hutan in 1998, have built a total of six rope bridges.

"With support from various partners at American and European zoos, private foundations and the Borneo Conservation Trust of Japan, we tried different designs using single ropes and more recently using old fire hoses from Japan intertwined together.

This was to see if different designs would be used by the orang utans," said wildlife veterinarian Dr Marc Ancrenaz who is also Co-Director of KOC.

Camera traps were set up to capture pictures in the event of orang utans using these rope bridges. However, they either malfunctioned or were destroyed by macaques that used the rope bridges regularly.

"Using rope bridges is a quick fix but eventually the most ideal solution would be to reconnect the forest and we are all working on this. When I say 'we' I mean everyone from governmental sector to environmental NGOs and, crucially, the palm oil

industry as well," added Dr Ancrenaz.

Genetic modelling carried out jointly by KOC, Wildlife Department, Cardiff University and Danau Girang Field Centre has shown that unless action is taken urgently to reconnect these populations, most of the current isolated orang utan populations within the Lower Kinabatangan will go extinct within our lifetime.

At present surveys carried out by SWD and KOC show that there are 1,000 orang utans within protected and non-protected areas of the Lower Kinabatangan. Sabah has an estimated 11,000 orang utans making it the stronghold for the Malaysian orang utan population with 80 per cent of the nation's wild orang utan population located here.

According to Wildlife Director Dr Laurentius Ambu, reconnecting forest via forest corridors or patches of forest is the next crucial step in addressing this issue for orang utans as well as other wildlife in Sabah.

"Even though it will be an expensive and long process, reconnecting isolated populations which were originally linked together will ensure the long term survival of not only Sabah's orang utans but other unique species such as the Bornean Pygmy Elephants, the sunbears, the Clouded Leopards and many more," said Dr Laurentius.



Crossing waterways like this can be fatal for orang utans because they cannot swim.