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## Will Orangutans Become Extinct Before the Conservation Community Gets Its Game On?

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There is nothing cuter than a baby orangutan with its tussle of red hair bedecking a mostly bald head and big brown inquisitive eyes sparkling with wisdom, curiosity, and soulfulness. Visiting orangutans in the wilds of Borneo or Sumatra tops my bucket list and it is clear I am running out of time to translate that dream into reality. A report detailing orangutan interactions with humans in Indonesia was released last week and is making international news. The report shows that nearly 700 orangutans were slaughtered by local villagers in Kalimantan, the Indonesian portion of Borneo. While the findings of the research are terribly sad, they are not terribly shocking. Similarly, the conservation community's response to the survey is predictable: a call for the opening of more conservation areas and stricter punishment of orangutan killers.

This call to action is standard operating procedure for thousands of conservation workers and millions, if not billions, of conservation dollars. As a conservation expert, I am all too familiar with the battle cry of the protected area. The concept is simple: we need to set up a network of safe havens for the world's most vulnerable species. In other words, keep animals safe by keeping people out. However, this solution is seriously flawed and doomed to failure for several reasons. In many cases, individuals existing on the brink of survival will resort to desperate measures to feed their families. Under such dire circumstances, the borders of a protected area are rarely a meaningful deterrent. As Suci Utami Atmoko, a field coordinator in Indonesia notes, hunger was the main reason for killing and eating the orangutans. 'Some residents were desperate and had no other choice but to kill them after spending three days hunting for food,'. As a conservationist, I find it inconceivable that I would, under any circumstances, kill an orangutan. As a mother, I find it not only possible but extremely plausible that I would do whatever it takes to feed my children after watching them suffer from hunger for days on end. I am not alone in this regard; in the case highlighted here, a full 70% of the villagers questioned knew the orangutans were a protected or endangered species when they killed them.

It is easy to point a finger at villagers whose homes adjoin orangutan habitat. It is much, much harder to conceive of the fact that we are equally, if not more so to blame for the likely demise of these precious primates. The impacts of hunting orangutan for bushmeat are a distant second to the significantly more intractable problem of deforestation. Deforestation on the island of Borneo is driven primarily by the timber trade and the expansion of palm oil plantations. The timber makes its way to places like China where furniture is constructed and then shipped to the U.S. to fill our homes with affordable furnishings. The palm oil is purchased by

companies such as Kraft, General Mills, and Cargill for use in our foods, cosmetics, and as biofuel. Because we are fundamentally uninterested in paying more for sustainable sourced products or protesting the poor labor and production practices of international corporations, these companies will continue their detrimental practices unchallenged and high value forest habitat in places like Indonesia will continue to be destroyed for our benefit.

I am not trying to play a blame game here. I am trying to point out that until the conservation community responds to the very real crisis of species extinction with significantly more effective solutions, a lot of time and money will be wasted. Conservation must be about more than establishing protected areas and imprisoning poachers, it must be about feeding children, providing medicine, reducing the ravages of HIV/AIDS and improving access to education. It must be about job creation. It must be about educating consumers, informing trade policies, and incorporating resource use into poverty reduction strategies. As long as our main tactical approach forces people to choose between feeding their children and protecting endangered species, the conservation community will lose every fight, every time. There are smarter, more holistic solutions that can and should be deployed. There are solutions that recognize human survival is, and must be, more highly valued than the survival of any other species. I am fully aware that our long-term survival depends on those same species. But then again, I have the luxury of thinking long-term because the food, water and health needs of my family have been met today and will, in all likelihood, be met again tomorrow. There are several billion people out there that do not have that same luxury.