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Orangutan Deaths Meet an Eerie Silence

Erik Meijaard

I'm confused. The newspapers are full of stories about orangutan killings. In East Kalimantan, oil palm workers have admitted to killing dozens of orangutans for "pest control." And studies suggest that orangutan killings are happening all over Kalimantan, and in parts of Sumatra, on a daily basis.

What surprises me is how quiet environmental NGOs are. I would have thought that these normally vocal groups, who all support orangutan conservation, would have something to say about the reported orangutan killings.

But apart from occasional activists such as the Center for Orangutan Protection, all I hear from them in the media is silence. Why?

This is a crucial time for orangutans. Hardly anyone has ever been sentenced or gone to jail for illegal acts against this protected species. So now that people have admitted to killing them, shouldn't there be a considerable uproar that pushes police and the courts to enforce the law and punish these criminals?

I worry that without such noise, the perpetrators will once again slip away, citing lack of evidence or some other legal reason why the conservation laws cannot be enforced. And with that, we would lose another opportunity to start turning the tide of declining orangutan populations.

The Indonesian government has committed itself to stabilizing all wild orangutan populations by 2017. If it is serious about this, it should think hard how it is going to effectively address illegal killings, which are reducing the remaining population by about 5 percent every year. Such losses are, of course, entirely incompatible with the concept of stabilizing populations.

Something drastic needs to happen.

Twenty percent of the people in Kalimantan still don't know that orangutans are legally protected, so public awareness campaigns are needed. Better patrols in protected areas would be helpful, too. But most orangutans live outside protected areas, and this is where most are being killed.

The best way to address this in the short term is through better law enforcement. And the best way to improve law enforcement is to show people that Indonesia's wildlife laws are indeed being taken seriously. That means that if someone kills an orangutan, he or she is sentenced accordingly.

The oil palm case in East Kalimantan — in which several people linked to the Khaleda Agropriya Malindo plantation were arrested last month — is an excellent opportunity for the government to make an example.

Indonesia's wildlife laws were blatantly infringed. The two men who have admitted to exterminating many orangutans should be punished accordingly. The evidence is there: cracked orangutan skulls, skeletons and mobile phone recordings of the killings.

The nation's criminal law also states that anyone instigating a criminal offense should also be punished. Sentencing the plantation managers responsible for ordering the killings to jail would send a very clear message: killing orangutans is prohibited and will be punished.

We know from interview surveys where the hotspots of orangutan killings and deforestation are. They include areas around Muara Kaman and Muara Wahau in East Kalimantan, around Palangkaraya and Pangkalanbun in Central Kalimantan, and the Kendawangan, Ketapang, and western Upper Kapuas areas in West Kalimantan. Batang Toru in Sumatra is also a deadly zone for orangutans.

I suggest the government and nongovernmental organizations that are serious about orangutan conservation focus their law enforcement initiatives on these areas.

I also hope that local people will start to support this. Dayak cultural revivals are taking place on a small scale — for example, among the Wehea people in East Kalimantan, where it is now quite common to support conservation and where forests are being protected against any kind of hunting.

Such initiatives need to be scaled up. For conservation to work, the people of Kalimantan need to get together and say that enough is enough. We need the support of all these people and must secure their commitment to protect and maintain their remaining forests and endangered wildlife species.

The conservation groups in Indonesia must work together to make sure orangutan butchers are held accountable, and to spread the word. So let's make ourselves heard. Opportunities like the one offered today, with evidence on the table, don't come along very often.

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