



Saving Borneo's Orangutan Corridors: WLT appeal launches on World Rainforest Day to safeguard ecosystem at breaking point

- ❖ In the Kinabatangan Floodplain of Malaysian Borneo, orangutan numbers have collapsed by over 95% since 1900 – and deforestation has split the remaining populations into genetic islands
- ❖ WLT partner HUTAN has spent decades saving land in the area and on World Rainforest Day, WLT is launching an appeal to help them secure a crucial link in their network of corridors
- ❖ The Kinabatangan has already lost 80% of its primary forest to logging for timber, but this year, HUTAN can save two plots that will form a natural shield for a much larger expanse of rainforest
- ❖ By adding to the land safeguarded in 2017 with help from naturalist Steve Backshall, these plots will hand a lifeline to elephants, pangolins, hornbills and hundreds of other species

TUESDAY 22 JUNE 2021: Critically Endangered orangutans, trafficking-hit pangolins, hornbills left without nest sites by deforestation and Borneo's most genetically diverse elephant population all stand to be protected for generations through a new fundraising appeal by World Land Trust (WLT).

Launched on World Rainforest Day, a new £150,000 campaign will fund the safeguarding of a new, crucial piece of a network of rainforest corridors by WLT partner HUTAN, who have spent decades saving land in an area of Malaysian Borneo – the Kinabatangan Floodplain of Sabah State – where 80% of the primary forest has already been lost to decades of logging for timber.

As [statistics show](#) that the world loses a football pitch of rainforest every six seconds, the case of the Kinabatangan’s Bornean Orangutans illustrates the damage such habitat loss can wreak on individual rainforests. From the estimated 20,000-strong population the floodplain hosted in 1900, only 785 of these great apes are left today, a population collapse of more than 95%.

In a landscape dominated by oil palm plantations, a failure to act against habitat fragmentation could spell disaster for orangutans. As HUTAN director Isabelle Lackman says: “It’s not just that the orangutan numbers are low but also the fact that they’re split into forest fragments, creating risks around genetic isolation and inbreeding. There’s just no other way it can work – we must create safe passages.”

With support from WLT’s new appeal, the Pangli corridor extension HUTAN can purchase and protect will bring conservation benefits far beyond its 10-acre size. Because of their strategic position between the pre-existing Pangli Virgin Jungle Reserve and the banks of the Kinabatangan River (**editors can find a map** in the gallery at the bottom of this release), these two properties will serve as a buffer for the unprotected forest to the west, making its conversion to other land uses far less likely.

Connectivity will also hand a lifeline to the Kinabatangan’s 250 Borneo Pygmy Elephants. Habitat fragmentation is forcing this population – the most genetically diverse for the species all across Borneo – onto private land and villages, and the toll of elephant lives lost from the ensuing conflict is rising every year. The protection of a passageway to the river will allow these herds to safely swim across to the protected banks of HUTAN’s Keruak Corridor to the north.

“This year’s [World Rainforest Day theme](#) is ‘Protected Together. Now. Forever’ and that is exactly the sort of transformation we could see if we support our partner HUTAN,” says Gwynne Braidwood, Conservation Programmes Officer at WLT. “Habitat fragmentation has pushed this landscape to breaking point but if word spreads in 2021, and people continue supporting conservation action through WLT, a future is possible where orangutan numbers can start recovering in a reconnected landscape.”

People and planet to benefit as Steve Backshall-backed corridor looks set to grow

This year’s World Rainforest Day finds the global community at the start of a pivotal decade to solve planetary crises, with leaders set to gather at the UN Biodiversity Convention talks (October) and the UN climate talks of COP26 (November) later in 2021.

Borneo, home to some of the planet’s oldest rainforests, illustrates what lies at stake if protection does not come to the lungs of the Earth. Half of the island’s original forest cover [is already gone](#) and for years, helping HUTAN save land on the island has been one of WLT’s global priorities, with WLT patron Steve Backshall and Olympic champion Helen Glover [personally leading](#) a fundraising appeal in 2017.

If this work continues this year through these two properties at Pangli, new land will be saved for the

Kinabatangan's 215 mammal species (40% of which are of conservation concern), its 314 bird species, 101 reptile species and more. Poachers will be kept away from the Critically Endangered Sunda Pangolin, one of the most trafficked mammals in the world. Cat species like the Sunda Clouded Leopard – a Vulnerable feline targeted by the medicinal trade – and ten primates like the Kinabatangan's 300 family groups of Northern Gray Gibbon will also benefit from an expanded protected home.

Crucially, as with every other reserve HUTAN has established since its foundation in 1996, any conservation work that takes place in this extension of the Pangli corridor will be led by and benefit local people – the 60-strong team that the WLT partner has built over the decades, enlisted almost exclusively from the *orang sungai* ("river people") communities of the nearby Sukau village.

The safeguarding of new land by the river will preserve the freshwater prawn fishery that local fishermen rely upon. It will allow to expand upon existing work by HUTAN's Indigenous-led workforce, such as the rangers rolling out artificial nests for hornbills – the Kinabatangan is home to 8 of Asia's 10 species – that have lost nesting sites in old growth trees to deforestation, or the villagers guarding Edible-nest Swiftlets full-time from poachers seeking to sell nests for Asia's lucrative trade.

"Looking at today's world of fragmented nature, it's easy to wonder whether there is hope for global rainforests but our decades of work for the Kinabatangan tell us this: when conservation is inclusive, everyone – from wildlife to Indigenous people – can thrive together," says HUTAN's Isabelle Lackman. "That is what we can continue to deliver at Pangli this year, with help from supporters of rainforest conservation around the world."

A LINK IN A BIGGER CHAIN: THE TWO PROPERTIES AND HUTAN'S LONG-TERM PLANS

To guarantee that the two plots purchased with help from WLT's appeal enjoy the highest possible level of protection, HUTAN has discussed terms with Malaysia's Forestry Department that will ensure the land is automatically gazetted as an extension of the Pangli Virgin Jungle Reserve, granting it a status – reserve – that will confer stronger legal protection than sanctuary status. In a country where all land is government-owned, avoiding a lease will allow to protect these properties in perpetuity.

HUTAN's plans do not stop at these properties, however. If the WLT appeal exceeds its £150,000 target, the WLT partner will be able to proceed with the second stage of their strategy, securing further plots of rainforest in the Kinabatangan Floodplain to expand their corridor network.

NOTES TO EDITORS

World Land Trust (WLT) protects the world's most biologically significant and threatened habitats acre by acre. Through a network of partner organisations around the world, WLT funds the creation of reserves and provides permanent protection for habitats and wildlife. Partnerships are developed with established and highly respected local organisations who engage support and commitment among the local community. It also works to raise awareness, in the UK and elsewhere, of the need for conservation, to improve understanding and generate support through information and fundraising.

<https://www.worldlandtrust.org/who-we-are-2/>

HUTAN was founded in 1996 in the Sabah State of Malaysian Borneo to research and reverse the decline of orangutan populations in the Kinabatangan Floodplain. After helping local authorities implement a conservation strategy for the species, HUTAN co-founders Isabelle Lackman and Marc Ancrenaz went on to build a 60-strong workforce of locally hired conservationists, today the driving force for programmes for orangutans, elephants, wildlife surveys, law enforcement, reforestation and more. At the time of writing, the team has saved 460 acres within the Keruak Corridor and planted 52,000+ native trees.

<https://www.hutan.org.my/about-us/>

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Pictures and maps of the Kinabatangan rainforests and the life that will be protected through HUTAN's plan can be found in [this gallery](#) and used in coverage, provided that they are appropriately credited.

