



Protecting the forest protects the habitat of elephants and various other species too. Source: FKL.

The Orangutan Project

How a successful not-for-profit organisation is working to protect Critically Endangered orangutans from extinction

The Orangutan Project was founded in 1998 by orangutan expert and conservationist Leif Cocks. Today, it takes a multifaceted approach to conservation, targeting the key threats facing the Critically Endangered orangutan population. Leif Cocks told us about the vital work of the Project, and about his own ethics which underpin the conservation work.

Orangutans are facing an existential threat. As vast tracts of rainforest continue to be hacked down to make way for increasingly unsustainable forms of agriculture, these remarkably intelligent primates are driven ever closer to extinction. This habitat loss threatens global biodiversity more generally, and is contributing to the collapse of indigenous communities, who rely upon the forests for their culture and subsistence.

Over the past two decades, The Orangutan Project has achieved huge success in countering these threats, through a diverse approach to conservation. It has targeted deforestation and habitat loss, while funding a multitude of local projects involving education, rehabilitation and habitat regeneration. As of last year, it has helped to legally protect over three million acres of threatened rainforest

and is supporting the monitoring of hundreds of orangutans as they are released back into their wild habitat.

We interviewed Founder and President Leif Cocks, to find out how this work began, and how it might succeed going forward.

Could you tell us a little about the experiences which led to you founding The Orangutan Project?

I established The Orangutan Project in 1998 so we could collectivise and protect remaining orangutan habitat, which is essentially scraps of remaining forest at this point, to safeguard wild populations and to rescue, rehabilitate and release the orangutans living in captive misery.

Soon after, I led the project to rehabilitate and release the first zoo-born orangutan back into protected Sumatran forest. It was a great moment, because until then it was presumed it couldn't be done,



Orangutan expert and conservationist, Leif Cocks.

but at the same time that I was releasing Temera, I was acutely aware that the forests of many other orangutans were being destroyed at a horrifying rate. Saving these remaining ecosystems before it's too late is the main game.

The Orangutan Project undertakes holistic conservation work. What does your holistic conservation entail?

First of all, to succeed we need to

secure viable ecosystems of the right type, shape and size of forest. We can't just save rainforest and trees. For us, that means piecing together and supporting the entire ecosystem in which orangutans thrive, and addressing all of the deeply complex issues that have contributed to orangutans becoming Critically Endangered in the first place. Our strategy covers legally protecting forests; securing, restoring and patrolling



First zoo-born orangutan to be rehabilitated, Temera, meets Leif in the jungle after her release.

There's not one part of that puzzle that can be left undone if we're genuinely aiming to secure the survival of orangutan species in the wild.

those forests; rescuing, rehabilitating and releasing ex-captive orangutans and educating and empowering local communities. There's not one part of that puzzle that can be left undone if we're genuinely aiming to secure the survival of the orangutan species in the wild.

What are the biggest threats to the future survival of the orangutan population?

They're facing multiple threats but the main one is habitat loss – over 80% of their essential lowland rainforest has now been destroyed, mainly to establish unsustainable mono-culture plantations.

We've now only got a few years up our sleeve to secure remaining populations of each subspecies of orangutan, in viable, intact ecosystems. By that I

mean the ecosystem itself and each population has to be large enough to be genetically viable. If we continue at the present rate, in ten years' time we will still have some orangutans left but their populations won't be viable any more: they won't have the genetic diversity to survive long term. This isn't just an orangutan problem – it's affecting thousands of species and ecosystems across the planet.

The Orangutan Project supports community programmes to mitigate human-wildlife conflict.

You have spoken of the importance of biocentrism. Could you explain what biocentric ethics mean to you?

There is a significant shift that we, as humans, need to make if we are to sustain our life on this planet. We need to move from anthropocentrism – which places humans and our interests as the central focus – towards biocentrism, which places us alongside all other living beings.

We need to understand that humans and all other species are members of the earth's community, that all species are part of a system of interdependence and that humans are not inherently superior to other living things.

This is no longer just a nicety. If we don't protect biodiversity and replenish the earth's natural resources, it simply won't be able to adequately sustain the human population for too much longer.

How important is it to deepen people's understanding of, and compassion for, non-human animals?

Without compassion, we will always be living in a world where animals and other people are used for our own profit, entertainment and enjoyment.

When you work closely with orangutans, you quickly come to see that they are self-aware, highly intelligent beings, and they don't deserve to be driven to extinction in this horrific way, but that compassion needs to extend to every living being.

Several decades ago when I was working in a zoo, I personally witnessed

– and actually had to be part of – the death of a healthy but injured giraffe. And he did not want to die. It was a traumatic experience, and I came to realise that I personally had an issue with animals suffering prior to their death. Because, no matter how humans try to rationalise and justify the suffering of livestock animals, I had now experienced firsthand that the death of an animal was horrific, even when 'humane'. From that moment, I began to make different choices about how I lived, ate and operated.

My choices were based upon not having animals suffer for me personally, but I had further to go because whilst I was now not causing immediate suffering, I was still bearing witness to the unspeakable mass extinction of our time: we all are, every day.

How has the past year of pandemic-related challenges affected your conservation work?

Unfortunately, it's just made a bad situation worse. When governments are crippled by unexpected and unfathomable costs, they will often look to short-term, quick profits – and inevitably that's the plundering of natural resources.

We've also had to grapple with continued regional lockdowns, which often meant local governance and authorities were absent or distracted, enabling the illegal poaching networks and land encroachers to come out in force. Our Wildlife Protection Units, ground teams and rescuers have worked around the clock – but it's been very difficult.



Vanilla on Suna's legs with her mother Violet (middle) and Anjeli (above).



The Orangutan Project is fighting for the scraps of remaining orangutan habitat.

How important is it for conservationists to work collaboratively with local and indigenous communities?

It's critically important because again if you don't, you're not going to solve the problem. But it's also a question of justice. I said earlier that we're now fighting for the scraps of remaining habitat. And it's worth noting that indigenous people – who have lived alongside orangutans for thousands of years – are also being pushed to survive in the same small fragments of forest, along with very poor subsistence farmers and species including Sumatran tigers and elephants. It's a recipe for disaster.



Rescuing a captive orangutan, named Mary.



Leif takes a young orangutan to jungle school at a Release Site.

Our community programmes include mitigating human-wildlife conflict, establishing sustainable, forest-friendly agriculture, employing and training local people in Wildlife Protection Units, school food programs and a number of economic and educational initiatives. But big picture – we need to re-create an economic system where the profits are sustainable, long term and distributed amongst the many. That's the very opposite of our current economic system which favours taking the profits from the many to the rich few, and from the long term to the very

We've got to work fast to secure and protect remaining viable, intact ecosystems – those intricate, complex life-support systems that sustain us all.

What future successes are you hoping to achieve with The Orangutan Project?

We've actually got very specific goals – which I guess is a great motivator for our small team and our growing supporter base. Over the next few years, working with our partners, we are striving to legally secure up to eight lowland, intact, richly biodiverse ecosystems. If

ecosystem becomes economically self-sustainable, and highly valued by their local community.

What can our readers do to support The Orangutan Project?

In founding The Orangutan Project, I wanted to make sure thousands of people could join together, pool our resources and do something to secure the survival of our fellow living beings. In so many ways, having many individual donors who give sometimes just a small monthly gift, is just so much more effective than applying for complicated grants where

Without compassion, we will always be living in a world where animals and other people are used for our own profit, entertainment and enjoyment.

short term. A prime example is the sustainability of poly-cultures, versus the short term, concentrated profits of mono-cultures.

Are there changes afoot – in public attitudes, global policy, or conservation more generally – which you think are reasons for optimism?

I hope so – but my big hope is that they happen soon enough for remaining biodiversity, because we've got such little time remaining. Once an ecosystem has been destroyed you really can't get it back by replanting.

we can do that, we'll have the ability to protect viable populations of all subspecies of orangutan and every other species that share their habitat – Critically Endangered Sumatran elephants, tigers, rhinos, gibbons, sun bears, tapirs, clouded leopards – the list is mind blowing.

This is of course a massive task – you can't just buy rainforest of any significance in Indonesia – but we do have success to date, and our goal is always to establish community-driven, forest-friendly initiatives so that eventually, each

they're sometimes more interested in ticking boxes rather than creating change on the ground.

The Orangutan Project is fast moving, dynamic and flexible – we have to be to work in the space we're in – and having a loyal donor base made up of thousands of people who passionately believe in the same goals we do is the most effective way to create such profound change.

So the best thing you can do is join us!

Visit www.theorangutanproject.org.uk