



Dear Friends and Supporters,

Greetings from the Cabang Panti Research Station, deep inside the Bornean rainforest, where I have come for my yearly visit to work with our amazing field and laboratory staff. Welcome to our latest issue of *Code RED*. This month's newsletter highlights two very different stories. Together they capture both the urgency and the wonder of conserving one of the world's last great rainforests.

Our first article brings you to the front lines of an unfolding emergency. An exceptionally severe dry season has fueled fires across West Kalimantan, threatening orangutan habitat, local communities, and even access to our research station. Thanks to years of working alongside Village Forest management teams, our staff and community partners were prepared to respond. But the scale of these fires is unprecedented, and they urgently need additional equipment and resources to continue protecting forests and the animals and people who depend on them.

Our second story reminds us why this work matters. Tim Laman shares an extraordinary firsthand account of watching the male orangutan Tunjuk attempt—twice—to reach giant honeybee nests deep in the forest. His observations offer a fascinating glimpse into orangutan problem-solving, persistence, and perhaps even planning. After more than three decades of studying these remarkable apes, they continue to surprise us with new insights into their intelligence and behavior.

As always, thank you for standing with us. Today, I ask for your help. Please consider supporting our [Emergency Fire Fighting Fund](#) so our teams have the equipment and resources they need to protect orangutan habitat and the communities on the

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Join Save Wild Orangutans

DONATE

URGENT! Please help us fight the fires that are burning throughout our region in West Kalimantan! We need to raise \$45,000 to buy additional firefighting protective gear, equipment, and to support impacted communities!

Donate Here: [Emergency Fire Fighting Fund](#)

front lines of this crisis. Together, we can protect both these incredible animals and the forests they call home for generations to come.



Cheryl Knott, PhD
Executive Director

[Gunung Palung Orangutan Conservation Program \(GPOCP\)](#)

Fighting to Protect Borneo's Forests: An Emergency Fire Crisis Unfolds

By Elizabeth Barrow, Conservation Research Director and Hendri Gunawan, Village Forest Program Manager

Across the world, communities and ecosystems are facing increasingly severe wildfire seasons. Record-breaking heatwaves, prolonged drought, and changing climate patterns are creating conditions where fires spread faster and burn more intensely.

Now, those same extreme conditions are threatening one of the most important orangutan landscapes on Earth: the forests surrounding Gunung Palung National Park in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. For our team and the communities who protect these forests, the fire crisis is no longer a distant threat. It is unfolding on the ground.



Fires in Tanjung Gunung village on the edge of Gunung Palung National Park and the gateway to the research station.

When peat forests burn, the danger continues underground

The forests surrounding Gunung Palung contain large areas of peat soils, ancient layers of partially decomposed vegetation that store enormous amounts of carbon. Under natural conditions, healthy peat swamp forests are often too wet to burn easily. However, when peatlands are degraded, drained, fragmented, or converted, they become increasingly vulnerable to fire. Degraded peat forests can dry out quickly, creating a dangerous cycle where disturbance increases fire risk, and fires further degrade the landscape.

During prolonged drought, surface vegetation can ignite easily. Once fire reaches the peat layer, it can continue burning underground for weeks or even months, spreading beneath the surface and re-emerging when conditions become favourable. These fires are extremely difficult and dangerous to fight. They release huge amounts of carbon into the atmosphere while producing thick, toxic smoke that threatens surrounding communities.

For people living near the fires, the impacts are immediate. Smoke exposure can cause serious health problems, particularly for children, the elderly, and those most vulnerable to respiratory illness. For wildlife, fires destroy critical habitat, reduce available food sources, negatively impact health, disrupt normal behaviour, and further fragment the forest landscape that orangutans and countless other species depend on for survival.



Village Forest management board members extinguishing fires in Pemangkat Village.

An extreme El Niño-driven dry season

El Niño is a natural climate phenomenon that shifts atmospheric and oceanic patterns, influencing rainfall and temperature around the world. Its impacts vary between regions, bringing increased rainfall and flooding in some areas, while causing reduced rainfall, drought, and extreme heat in others.

Strong El Niño events have contributed to some of the world's most severe climate-related disasters, including major droughts, floods, and wildfire crises. In Southeast Asia, El Niño events are often associated with prolonged drought and elevated temperatures, conditions that increase the risk of widespread fires.

This year, Indonesia is experiencing one of the most challenging dry seasons in more than a decade. Across Kalimantan, months of reduced rainfall and high temperatures have dried vegetation and peat soils, creating highly vulnerable conditions where fires can spread rapidly.

For months, our teams and local communities have been preparing. GPOCP/Yayasan Palung has worked with Village Forest management units to strengthen fire preparedness. This has included

providing and maintaining firefighting equipment, conducting patrols, and monitoring areas considered at highest risk.

Despite these preparations, fires have now reached the forests we work to protect.



Members of Pemangkat Village fighting the fires in their community forests using equipment supplied by GPOCP/Yayasan Palung.

Fires threaten protected forests and communities

The most serious situation is currently occurring in Alam Hijau Village Forest in Pemangkat Village.

Within just 10 days, fire has destroyed more than 20 hectares of protected orangutan habitat. The fire reached the community patrol camp, where teams have been working to protect the building and prevent further spread. The peat beneath the camp has already burned, but the structure remains standing for now.

As the fire continues to move closer toward neighbouring Village Forests, firefighting teams are working under extremely difficult conditions. Smoke from burning peat has created hazardous conditions, while strong winds have made fires increasingly unpredictable.

Local authorities have deployed water-bombing helicopters to support firefighting efforts, while community members continue fighting fires on the ground.

Several families living closest to the fires have already evacuated vulnerable relatives, including young children and elderly family members, due to the combined risks of smoke exposure and spreading flames.

The danger faced by frontline teams is also very real. During firefighting efforts near the camp, one member of the Village Forest management unit fell through burned peat and sustained a serious leg injury after coming into contact with a burned log. He was evacuated to a local hospital for treatment.

At one point, worsening wind and fire conditions forced members of our team and community firefighters to shelter in place until it became safe to move again.



Aftermath of devastating fires in Pemangkat Village that burned 20 ha of orangutan habitat.

A landscape under pressure

Pemangkat is not the only area facing fire threats.

In nearby Pulau Kumbang, fires have entered village areas and are moving closer towards the protected Village Forest there. In Padu Banjar, fires have also been burning near the village and approaching forest areas, although firefighting efforts have successfully prevented spread so far.

Additional fires are threatening another Village Forest in the south of the region, where teams are responding rapidly to prevent smaller fires from growing.

Even our research activities have been affected. The access route to our research station in the village of Tanjung Gunung burned for several days, restricting access and making it increasingly difficult to transport supplies and support ongoing work inside the National Park.



Village members, GPOCP/Yayasan Palung staff and Gunung Palung National Park rangers worked together to extinguish fires in Tanjung Gunung Village.

Help us protect Borneo's forests

Our community firefighting teams are working every day to detect fires, protect forests, and keep communities safe. However, the scale of this emergency requires urgent additional support.

We need your help to raise **\$45,000 for emergency firefighting operations across 10 Village Forests and surrounding community lands**. Your donation will help provide:

- Fire Patrols to detect and respond to fires quickly
- Protective equipment for frontline firefighting teams
- Fire pump, hoses, and essential firefighting supplies
- Emergency support for communities protecting forests from further destruction

Every contribution directly supports local people who are working tirelessly to protect Borneo's forests, wildlife, and their own homes.

The coming weeks will be critical. With your support, we can respond quickly, contain fires before they spread further, and help protect one of the world's most important orangutan landscapes.

Please support our emergency firefighting fund today.

[Emergency Fire Fighting Fund](#)



Village firefighting team in Pemangkat Village.

Tunjuk and the Honey Tree: A Glimpse into the Orangutan Mind

By Tim Laman, Wildlife Photojournalist and GPOCP Board Member

I am a Gunung Palung old-timer. I started here as a research assistant in 1987, did my PhD research here in the early 90's, and have returned nearly every year since, working alongside my wife Cheryl Knott and her team, photographing and filming the stories of GP's orangutans and other wildlife. The amazing thing is that even after nearly forty years, every visit brings some new revelations, and this trip was no exception.

As the unofficial photographer for the National Park as well as the GP Orangutan Project, Park Director Bapak Prawono Meruanto asked me to try to capture some fresh images of orangutans and wildlife for the National Park's use. He was keen to have documentation of new baby orangutans that had been born since last year's mast fruiting event, especially a youngster named Kibar that he had had the honor of naming. Despite being on a short visit, I had great luck, and the team located Kibar, traveling with her mom Kabar and older brother King, a few days after I arrived. I was excited to be able to capture some nice images of this playful youngster.



Kibar with her mother Kabar. Photo © Tim Laman

The highlight of my visit however, happened when the male named Tunjuk passed right by the camp one afternoon while I was there downloading my photos from the morning. I hadn't seen Tunjuk before – a younger male, who had been unflanged for many years, but now was starting to develop his cheek flanges. He has a permanently pointing index finger, probably caused from an injury, earning him the name *Tunjuk* which means 'point' in Indonesian. Excited by the chance to photograph this male in the rare transitional stage, I grabbed my gear again and started following him with the crew. What transpired over the rest of the afternoon was one of the most direct glimpses into the mind of a wild orangutan that I have ever experienced.

After a brief feeding session in a *Dipterocarpus* tree near the river edge, Tunjuk crossed the tree crowns bridging the river and "hung out" for a long time in one tree. We had a clear view of him from the riverbank below and soon realized that he was staring in the direction of a big dead tree which had shed all its bark and most of its branches. What was of interest there? Finding a gap through the foliage, we spotted a massive hive of the giant Asian honeybee, hanging below a dead branch. Was Tunjuk thinking about trying to reach this hive?



Tunjuk stares up at the bee hive. Photo © Tim Laman



The object of Tunjuk's desire - a giant Asian honeybee hive. Photo © Tim Laman

He spent considerable time looking up, perhaps thinking about this beehive and how to get to it. The research team have recorded orangutans feeding on small wasp nests on many occasions. The nutrient rich larvae are no doubt the attraction in those nests, and we have seen orangutans sustain many stings to enjoy these delicacies. But was Tunjuk really thinking about attacking a massive hive of Asian honeybees? Did he have experience and know what he was getting into? Was he after larvae or honey or both? We have never recorded an orangutan feeding on a giant Asian honeybee nest, so this was going to be interesting.

Tunjuk now took a little rest to think about it further. Yes, I'm projecting a human thought process onto this orangutan, but if you keep reading, you will see that the way things unfolded over the rest of the afternoon, it's hard to escape the conclusion that Tunjuk had honey on his mind.



Tunjuk takes a break. Photo © Tim Laman

He then got up and moved toward the honey tree, but there were no trees whose crowns came very close to the trunk of this dead tree. He climbed into the closest smaller tree in the mid-story of the forest, and tried the "tree swaying" technique, using his body weight to try to bend the tree over so he could climb onto the honey tree. But he failed. The tree he was in was too stiff. He looked up toward the beehive for a while. Then apparently giving up, he moved off to the west, leaving the tree behind. Was he done with honey for the day?



Aerial view of the honey tree, with the large hive dead center. Photo © Tim Laman

Tunjuk travelled west for a while, stopping to rip open a termite nest up in a tree and feed there, and then carried on until we saw him climb very high in the canopy of a large emergent dipterocarp tree where he could clearly get a view across the forest. What was he looking for? He then descended to the lower canopy – a favorite level for travel where many trees are interconnected – and made a beeline to the southwest. We bashed our way through the undergrowth, wondering where he was heading with such determination. Then suddenly, I saw that he had stopped at another large dead snag. This one had small trees near it, and he had already transferred to the trunk, grasping some slender lianas hanging there. I immediately had the thought that he must have come to another honey tree. Sure enough, we found a gap looking up, and there hanging below a high branch was another hive of giant Asian honeybees!

Tunjuk did indeed have honey on his mind! It was so apparent that having failed at honey tree number one, he had purposely sought out this second tree, that he either remembered or had spotted from his high viewpoint. But could he make it up this one? Yes, he was on the trunk, but the lianas seemed too small to hold his weight. He tested them but they were pulling loose. He tried to bear-hug the tree to climb it that way, but it was too big. After several minutes precariously perched on the side of this huge dead tree, he again gave up and dropped back into a small tree nearby. It was the first time I have seen an orangutan try to climb a tree and fail.



Tunjuk tries to climb the second honey tree. Photo © Tim Laman

The score at the end of the day: Bees 2, Orangutans 0. It turns out the bees know what they are doing in terms of putting their nests in places that even large orangutans can't access. Of course, we shouldn't go too far in projecting our human thought processes on orangutans when interpreting their behavior,

but this series of events was so human-like that I couldn't help it. It was as if you had your heart set on eating sushi, but the first Japanese restaurant you went to was closed, so you drove all the way across town to go to find another one. Again, maybe I am projecting, but as he sat there in a small crotch below the honey tree looking up, he looked dejected. After sitting there for some time, he moved off a few meters and built a nest right in the open and lay down, right beneath the honey tree, looking up. We joked that he was going to spend the night dreaming of honey.



One final shot of Tunjuk from that afternoon. I'm pretty sure he is thinking about how to get to that honey! Photo © Tim Laman

Management of Cabang Panti Research Station is conducted by the Gunung Palung National Park Office (BTN-GP) in collaboration with GPOCP/YP. Scientific research is carried out in conjunction with the Faculty of Biology at Universitas Nasional (UNAS) and Boston University.

"it's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see" — Henry David Thoreau



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