



Sequence of Orangutan crossing from right to left caught on video camera trap on June 23, 2020 in Sungei Pin, Kinabatangan.

Symbol of visionary connectivity restoration

Kan Yaw Chong

● First of a series

THE first bridge built by an oil palm plantation in Sabah recorded five orangutan crossings in eight months.

Utter joy erupted at Sawit Kinabalu's 2,632ha Sungei Pin Estate Conservation Area, Kinabatangan, on June 23 when video images captured "the most beautiful" of the five crossings, believed involving three different Orangutans.

"It was the greatest excitement when we had that one on a bridge that was built on Oct 21-23, 2019," Orangutan researcher Dr Felicity Oram exuded.

"We didn't expect to get the results so quickly," said a jubilant Philipa Mojilis, Manager of State-owned Sawit Kinabalu Corporate Communication Unit.

Dr Felicity, a key driver in this connectivity restoration project, agreed.

"It is quite a rare event to be able to capture an Orangutan actually using a bridge like that on video, which is something we have been trying to do on my side as an Orangutan researcher for a long time.

"What makes this fantastic thing happen was a process of very bonded collaboration between Sawit Kinabalu and us (Pongo Alliance's skill set on conservation practitioners like Dr John Payne and Hutan) that helped us capture this lucky image," she noted.

Raising hope

"I think it is tremendous, it is very positive and very encouraging to our collaboration with Sawit Kinabalu because whatever commitment, whatever trust, whatever collaboration they have given us to do this together we can start to see a clear case of connectivity restoration which they have invested in.

"It is showing some results, it gives me hope – someone who is still very young and upcoming in the world of conservation," said Melaka-hailed Pravind Segaran, a Masters degree student at UMS under the supervision of Dr Felicity.

But this ecstatic result is actually a culmination of Sawit's reforestation of 2,632 ha Sungei Pin Conservation Area with flood resistant species like Sepat that started 17 years ago in 2003, when, believe it or not, this writer was there and I returned last week all fired up about the latest outcome!

Noticeable change in mindset

A positive note is there has been a perceptible change of mindset among planters in Kinabatangan, perhaps best typified by what Sungei Pin Estate Manager, Mohd Muszam Syah, who conceded:

"Years ago when I was posted in Jambongan Estate, we cut the trees but here we must protect, we must preserve and I love it so the collaboration with Pongo Alliance is very interesting because it's not

just protecting the wildlife and the forests but also a benefit to our workers," he said, citing the awareness program and a growing corp of trained forest rangers and Honorary Wildlife Wardens.

"It gives them the opportunity to learn. So I hope this project is continuous, maybe not just here but a future I hope where we can see more and more plantation growers to join the project," Muazam wished.

"For us, it's a commitment with the vision of our Managing Director (Masri Pudin) to the projects starting 2003."

Positive mood on visionary company

The positive mood among Sawit's ranks is infectious, aptly transmitted by Nazrin Epizal Ma'mun, Acting Manager of Agronomy: "I am very happy, I am very proud of Sawit (Kinabalu) because they have done something that is more visionary than many!"

Dr Felicity agrees wholeheartedly with this visionary tribute to Sawit, especially its practical openness to connectivity restoration which she says is really the top dog corporate quality that decides the destiny of the orangutan populations in Kinabatangan.

"I guess what the video images symbolise is the restoration of connectivity, that's what it shows, it is a symbol of the interest in Sawit Kinabalu in making that kind of connectivity happen, it is a demonstration of that kind of commitment to want to have a connected landscape," Felicity said.

Magic window to what's needed

"How the Orangutan is using the bridge is a magic window for us because for researchers we always wonder – do they use it the way we think?" she asked.

Yes, it's a magical sight that excites optimism because it surprised everyone how quickly it has happened.

"It is really great because it is an indication that it is really needed. If you ask somebody to make an investment, you always like the idea that it is useful."

This particular bridge is clearly useful.

But is there a bigger futuristic concern beyond this flash of excitement and big deal? Yes.

Zeal and caution on future of Orangutans

When asked if she shares primatologist, Dr Marc Ancrenaz's optimism on the future survival of Sabah's Orangutan once expressed to me, Dr Felicity showed her trade mark balance between zeal and caution.

"With the co-operation of the oil palm estates, yes. Without no, because



Sawit Kinabalu staff celebrate the bridge success on site in Sungei Pin. 7th from left is Philipa Mojilis. Note bridge at background.

Orangutan particularly the males have to move across the landscapes.

"If the door is not open for them to do that their long term is going to be inbreeding in smaller and smaller places. I am not talking about tomorrow but the long-term view is not good. It's the thing I say on top of everything."

Small wonder Dr Felicity kept highlighting and repeating Sawit Kinabalu's openness to her, Pongo Alliance, Hutan and its extra receptiveness to what really counts – openness to connectivity restoration.

Grasp inert need of male Orangutan to travel a lot

Essentially, that means grasping the inert need of the Oangutan to move around, to travel far and wide across the landscape, particularly the male Orangutans, she said.

In fact, if you are curious what the job description of a male Orangutan is, Dr Felicity is sure of one thing: "If you are a male Orangutan, your job in life is to move around when you are grown up."

"We have learned from genetic studies and long-term studies of here by Hutan for

24 years in the forests that it's the females that stay in one location and raise their babies from zero to 15 in the forests and then the males may stay around a little bit then they move to another one and another location, they are not involved in raising their babies, that's the females' job.

"So when the males are just becoming adults they move around a lot and also when they become mature and flanged with flappy cheek pads, various studies here and elsewhere show there is an indication that females like the ones with bigger flanges – that's an attractive male in the Orangutan world," Dr Felicity said.

Most sightings of Orangutan far from forests are males

"So when we were in the process of studying the Orangutan in the past year-and-a-half with Pongo Alliance, Pravind and myself, most of the sighting records of Orangutan that are far from the forests within 20km from the forests are all males.

"One thing that we have learnt over time in the study of Orangutan in Kinabatangan is that not only orangutans need to travel far to move between the sparse population of maybe between two orangutans per kilometre and between that the females with clusters of related females, the males move between because what they have a loose community structure," she said.

This astute understanding of orangutan travel behaviour is the key to Dr Felicity's keen interest in pulling the bridge across the river Sungei Pin from a small Pocket of original forest in Bukit Durian.

Males will cross plantation to see females

"When you have taken most of the forests away and left with a little bit of forests here and a little bit of forests there, what we are beginning to see in this project is an idea that's not a problem for the orangutan which still tries to maintain their community structure just as if there was a big forest when they are crossing an oil palm plantation to this small forest pocket (Bukit Durian) where the female lives," Dr Felicity explained.

Ah, yes indeed, there is a healthy female with a baby living in Bukit Durian forest pocket. Both Pravind and Felicity confessed they had not seen the mother and child but Sawit workers had picture of her and the baby.

Who is the 'this' caught crossing the bridge?

But here is the question: Who was caught crossing the bridge strapped to a massive fig tree on the Bukit Durian side of Sungei Pin Conservation Area on June 23, 2020?

"It's a macho male just growing his

flanges so he's becoming big, it went one direction away from Bukit Durian in the afternoon of June 22, wandered around a bit, stayed overnight and came back to Bukit Durian the next morning.

"That's pretty, we don't know what's going on in his mind but it's not unusual for male Orangutan to do that kind of thing. They would go to a new place in the afternoon, check it out, then move around."

So knowing full well in a fragmented forest landscape of Kinabatangan that males are still determined to cross oil palms to pockets of forest where females live, Dr Felicity said:

"The most important thing is that we need collaboration with the oil palm plantation owners and growers because in order to maintain the community structure, most of the land is oil palm so that those males need to be able to pass by. And what we are finding out is that for the most part they do on their own without anybody knowing," she noted.

Spectre of decline in Kinabatangan without oil palm support

"So, now what we are looking at is a situation in Kinabatangan is without the support of oil palm growers we probably won't have a viable population any more. They will become more and more little islands and you won't have good reproduction and good orangutan community structure.

"Without plantations as key players and key participants we will have continued decline so really the goal here is to work together to address this challenge," Dr Felicity said.

As far as *Daily Express* is concerned, Sawit Kinabalu has scored a high distinction in this reputational investment and Dr Felicity has rightly paid Sawit the deserved tribute.

"I have to say right from the beginning, from the first time we met with Sawit Kinabalu they were very open to have us come and see their areas, they lent their staff to look around and very interested in what we were finding and we were very interested in what they were observing.

"Sawit was not only very open to building their bridge but also very open to investing on the best materials. The actual camera trap that caught that image is a camera trap that that Sawit Kinabalu bought, they took the initiative to buy a relatively cheap one so that they could get it installed quickly.

"We lent our expertise on camera traps, Sawit lent their machine shop and work together for a good casing that is macaque-proof and rain-proof and all the images we have so far are from Sawit Kinabalu cameras," Dr Felicity paid tribute to a more than willing investor in connectivity restoration.



Md Muazam



Pravind



Nazrin



Dr Felicity showing how the bridge is strapped to a massive fig tree.



Close-up of the bridge over Sungei Pin.