

# THE SWITCH REPORT

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## **An Interview With Orangutan Land Trust Founder Michelle Desilets**

*Michelle Desilets is Executive Director of the Orangutan Land Trust, an organisation that seeks to ensure the long-term survival of orangutans in the wild by securing remaining habitat. She is a key player in the campaign for sustainable palm oil. Michelle was Founder and Chief Executive of Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation UK which supports the rescue and rehabilitation of orangutans. Questions by Alistair McCaskill*

### **With so many threatened species, how did you come to devote your life to orangutans?**

To be honest, my first love was actually the mountain gorilla! But in 1994, I joined a volunteer tour to “study” orangutans in Borneo (Indonesia). While there, I met a tiny, emaciated orangutan orphan kept in a cramped cage behind a ranger’s hut and he stole my heart. I cried my eyes out every night thinking of him shivering and frightened in that wire cage. Eventually, Somalia was removed from the cage and I, along with a series of other volunteers, including Lone Droscher Nielsen, nursed him back to health 24/7. He was joined by 3 other young orphans, and I used to sleep on a cot with 4 baby orangutans in drooping nappies clinging to me throughout the night.

My life changed as a result of meeting Somalia. I simply could not turn away once I had seen those chocolate-brown eyes gazing at me, as if to say, “Won’t you please help me?” Over the years, I have had the privilege of knowing hundreds of orangutans on a first name basis, watching them recover from trauma, starvation, illness and injury, and grow to become strong, confident and independent. Their resilience is astonishing. They have given me unconditional love and helped me through difficult times (when one thinks about what they have endured, it is kind of difficult to feel too sorry for oneself!)

So, yes, I admit, I am a true-blooded orangutan hugger (post-quarantine, of course!) But since 1994, I have also come to broaden my concern beyond the orangutans that I knew. Realising that the rescued orangutans were only the tip of the iceberg – that they were the lucky ones – and that many thousands more were suffering or perishing in areas beyond the reach of the rescue teams, I had to do more. Not only did I have to speak for them, I had to explore solutions that addressed the threats to the thousands of orangutans I shall never have the privilege of meeting. Once you have known an individual orangutan, and come to understand how unique and deserving each one is, you can extrapolate that awareness and begin to consider that every orangutan is unique and deserving of a life in the wild.

### **You’ve been visiting Borneo for 20 years. What changes have you observed over that time?**

In the early years, most of the rescued orangutans were confiscated as pets or from somewhere along the supply chain of the illegal wildlife trade. In 1997, Lone Droscher and I set out to create a new rehabilitation centre in Central Kalimantan where we knew of about a dozen illegally-held orangutans in need of rescue. With support from Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation, the Nyaru Menteng Orangutan Project opened in 1999 with a view of

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eventually providing a safe home for as many as 100 orangutans undergoing the rehabilitation process. It wasn't long before the project exceeded this number.

In around 2003, Nyaru Menteng began to see a big shift. Suddenly, they were being called out to areas where forests were being cleared at a relentless rate for agriculture. The oil palm boom had come to Central Kalimantan. Instead of confiscating pet orangutans, the rescue teams were discovering wild orangutans that had come into conflict in these areas.

The situation was this: wild orangutans in ever-dwindling patches of forest were starving because of competition for the diminishing food sources left available to them. In desperation, they would venture into the newly-planted areas of oil palm where they broke apart the young plants to get to the soft inner shoots. This would leave the plant damaged to the point that it would never mature into a fruit-bearing tree. As such, the orangutan became regarded as an agricultural pest, and plantation managers put bounties of \$10-20USD on the head of an orangutan. With this incentive, plantation workers, seldom armed with guns, took any means possible to bring an orangutan down. Based on a tip-off, the rescue team would arrive at a scene to find orangutans beaten unconscious or to death with wooden planks and iron bars, butchered with machetes, buried alive or doused with petrol and set alight. Sometimes infants were spared, and kept as pets or sold on into the wildlife trade. The "lucky" survivors were rescued.

Within a few short years Nyaru Menteng, built for 100 orangutans, was now caring for over 600 orangutans and bursting at the seams. Yet the orangutans just kept flooding in. Healthy, wild orangutans were translocated as quickly as possible to safe areas of forest, but these safe areas kept disappearing. After several hundred translocations there was nowhere left to put more.

Facing this crisis, I had to change the focus of my work. Previously, the organisation I then directed (BOS UK) concentrated primarily on raising funds to care for the orangutans in the centre. And there were other similar organisations around the world doing the same. But it seemed no-one was looking at the root cause of the displacement (and demise) of so many orangutans or doing anything about it. And no-one was seriously looking at securing forests into which to release all these orangutans. The first step was to try to understand how this sudden rush to clear forests for oil palm was affecting the orangutan and what could be done about it. We investigated the issue and published reports to raise awareness and began to meet with palm oil companies on the ground. We became involved in the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil and encouraged cooperation between growers in the region and the NGOs working on the ground. We also supported with our limited funds efforts to find, secure and manage river islands and other forests areas for the orangutans.

In 2009, I formed Orangutan Land Trust to focus directly on these issues and objectives. The mission of Orangutan Land Trust is to support sustainable solutions for the long-term survival of the orangutan in the wild, by securing safe areas of forest for their continued existence. We pursue our mission in three key ways. First, by encouraging policy makers to develop and implement strong policies and to uphold existing laws that contribute to orangutan conservation. Secondly, by supporting in-country initiatives and efforts to help deliver their aims to protect the orangutan and its habitat. And finally, by developing appropriate and responsible partnerships to deliver tangible outcomes on the ground.

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Orangutan Land Trust is guided by its Board of Trustees made up of individuals with a wide range of expertise in sustainability and conservation issues, and backed by a formidable Scientific Advisory Board including many of the leading experts in orangutan and forest conservation in South East Asia.

Over the past 20 years, I have seen a lot of changes in Borneo. Not surprisingly, a great deal of forested area has been converted to oil palm. Logging, both legal and illegal continues as well. And as the population grows, both to drive these industries and for other opportunities opening in the region, more settlements are created, roads built and cities expanded. The capital of Central Kalimantan, Palangka Raya, (near to the Nyaru Menteng project) has really changed a lot on the last few years especially; shopping malls, hypermarkets and cinemas now serve an increasingly wealthy population. Every time I visit, there are new buildings going up, luxury hotels opening, roads being widened. There is little doubt that palm oil has a lot to do with an improved economy in the region.

## ***How do you rank the major threats to orangutans?***

Today, the number one threat to orangutans is the conversion of their habitat for oil palm. Logging, both legal and illegal also are a significant threat but not at the scale of the clearing specifically for oil palm. Hunting (which is made easier as a result of these activities) also is being increasingly seen as a threat. And finally, hunting of orangutans to capture an infant for the wildlife trade continues to be a problem. This always results in the death of the mother who will never give up her baby.

Dr Erik Meijaard, one of OLT's Scientific Advisors, says: "We simply don't know how many orangutans remain. I think we have for a long time had estimates for Borneo that were way too low. Even now, there are some 120,000 km<sup>2</sup> of forest and degraded forests that still contain orangutans on Borneo, and densities would have to be pretty low to get to 40,000 or fewer. Then again, the speed at which habitat is disappearing is very high. I am just back from a trip to SW Kalimantan (Kendawangan Reserve), and only a few orangutans are now reported from this highly degraded region full of oil palm, burnt over grasslands and other fire-induced vegetation. Similarly, around Danau Sentarum pretty much all habitat has been turned into oil palm and inside the park there is little forest. These are just examples, and we all know many stories like it, but it is really hard to say what this means quantitatively and in terms of trends. On top of that there is the killing issue, which we estimated in two papers to be as high as 3,000 orangutans per year, with a minimum of 700 or so in recent years, and which is only partly related to the habitat loss issue (most killing still occurs in forest areas). Serge is working on a new population estimate for Borneo, but this will take some time. So, that leaves us with guesses: something like 50,000 orangutans on Borneo of which some 15,000 are relatively secure, and of which some 2,000 are lost [each year] through killing or starvation and disease. They will be around for a few more decades at least, but many more will perish."

## ***How are you able to secure forest areas?***

Securing forest areas can be achieved in many ways. Additionally, there can be many steps and hurdles along the way. First, we must identify a potential area, determine its current land status and consider if it would be an option for long-term security. Then we must survey the area to determine the presence, if any, of a wild orangutan population and its

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density/numbers. We must also survey for the potential for the area to maintain introduced orangutans, looking at the maturity of the trees, the number of food sources and fruiting cycles. Then we must anticipate the risk of encroachment: are there local communities or roads providing access to the region? Is it an area that would be attractive to loggers, oil palm growers, miners? We must find areas that satisfy a large number of criteria along these lines: suitability to maintain a viable population of orangutans, remoteness and inaccessibility, legal status, community support, etc.

Generally speaking, we are talking about securing very large areas of forest, so that we can create viable populations. Orangutans need a lot of room given the dispersal of their food sources and risk of competition. The best option in Indonesia for securing such large areas (50,000 to 100,000 ha) is through what is called “Ecosystem Restoration Concession.” These are areas of ex-production forest (in various stages of degradation), that the government will make available for conservation and restoration purposes. While legally speaking, orangutans and their conservation are the responsibility of the government, it is the NGOs that must pay all costs associated with the rescue, care, rehabilitation and release of orangutans, and this includes paying for the lease of the forest into which they are to be released! To secure a 60 year lease, we must pay approximately \$15 USD per hectare (the lease is renewable at the end of this term). Of course there are many other costs associated with managing and restoring the area which add significantly to the budget.

In other cases, it may be a matter of trying to change land status and affect spatial planning. The Mawas Reserve in Central Kalimantan, for example, which is home to 3000 wild orangutans, is an area which we would like to see granted protected status or National Park status. The Leuser Ecosystem in Sumatra, the only place in the world where orangutans, tigers, elephants and rhinos co-exist, is under extreme risk with the proposed Aceh spatial plan. Campaigners are working hard to encourage decision-makers to reject this spatial plan, which would see large areas currently under protected status made available to logging and palm oil companies.

Another project we are working on is to secure a large river island that can be used as the penultimate stage in the rehabilitation process (“Orangutan University”) as well as for permanent sanctuary for otherwise unreleaseable orangutans. For this, it is a matter of paying the local community and their regional government a substantial fee for land-use rights in perpetuity, but the land remains community land.

## ***How difficult will it be to ensure such areas remain protected over the very long term?***

Ultimately, we would try to ensure that the terms of the agreement include protection over a long period of time or in perpetuity, and this may include a change of official status of the land. But to actually physically protect it over the years will mean the constant management of NGOs like OLT and their partners. Help with this can be found by involving the local community at every step of the way and making them conservation partners. By providing benefits to the communities in the regions, such as jobs, education, health care, clean water, etc., they have an incentive to assist in the protection of these areas and to refrain from encroaching. Again, the selection of the area in the first place includes minimising risk. For example, one prime area of forest we are looking at cannot be reached by road or river. Not only does this mean it is unlikely that speculators will go to this area, any potential product

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(timber, minerals, palm oil) cannot be easily transported out (the river is white-water and not navigable in these upper reaches).

## ***What drove the creation and growth of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)?***

The RSPO was developed by NGOs and the industry together to address the real impacts of conventional production of palm oil. There is little doubt that campaigns like ours and other NGOs such as Friends of the Earth and Union of Concerned Scientists made people all along the supply chain nervous about their part in what was being revealed. The graphic images of orangutan victims in the plantations caught the world's attention and were difficult to ignore. I think different stakeholders may have gone into the RSPO with slightly diverse motivations, but ultimately there is a shared vision that palm oil can and should be produced as responsibly as possible.

The RSPO has evolved and progressed enormously since its inception. OLT (and formerly BOS UK) have been involved most of the way. We helped to draft the guidelines for the New Plantings Procedures (which are mandatory for all RSPO members regardless of whether they are currently seeking certification or not) as well as the revision of the Principles and Criteria, accepted last year. In this revision, OLT successfully introduced a new indicator for “zero tolerance” for the capture, harm or killing of any Rare, Threatened or Endangered species. We also serve on the Complaints Panel and the Dispute Settlement Facility. The new Principles & Criteria (P & C) is a vast improvement over the first version, but sadly falls short on a few important issues: clearing of secondary (non-HCV) forest and peatland is not prohibited, nor is the use of [the herbicide] Paraquat, for example. However, there is nothing in the P & C that *requires* companies to clear secondary forest or peatland or to use Paraquat, and we, along with other NGOs, call for members to perform at the top of the standard (or beyond) and not try to “get away” with the bare minimum. With 1300 members now in the RSPO, we believe that the standard does have the potential to transform the market to one that is hugely more sustainable than business as usual.

Some RSPO growers have already been performing beyond the standard for a number of years now. Sustainable and deforestation-free palm oil *does* exist. To address the shortcomings of the new P & C, and to demonstrate innovations that ensure palm oil is truly responsible, these growers and some NGOs formed the Palm Oil Innovation Group. Their 10-point charter, to which members commit, was launched in November 2013. Amongst other things, the charter compels members to not clear secondary forest or plant on peat or to use paraquat. Additionally, they must actively protect wildlife both within and outside of their concession areas. Founding members include OLT, Greenpeace, RAN, Forest Peoples Programme, and the growers New Britain Palm Oil and Agropalma.

Today, the largest grower of palm oil, Wilmar, has committed to no deforestation in the palm oil it grows and trades. Along with other prominent companies also making this commitment, over half of all palm oil produced now falls under “no deforestation.” Manufacturers and retailers are also making similar commitments to remove deforestation from their supply chains: Unilever, Colgate-Palmolive, Mars, Hershey, Nestle, Safeway, General Mills, Kellogg, etc. Some commitments are stronger than others, but all show a strong trend in a global market place for sustainable and deforestation-free supply chains.

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***A number of very large companies have committed to using 100% RSPO-certified palm oil, but it still makes up a small fraction of global production and demand is growing quickly. What are the prospects of creating a palm oil industry that no longer poses a threat to natural habitat?***

If I am not mistaken, currently about 16% of all palm oil produced is Certified Sustainable Palm Oil (CSPO). Of that, about 51% is being purchased as CSPO (that is, they are paying the premium requested). Actually, for such certification systems, this is very quick uptake compared to Marine Stewardship Council, Forest Stewardship Council, BonSucra, FairTrade and the like. I believe that 2013-2014, given the no-deforestation commitments previously mentioned in addition to progress by RSPO, may represent a tipping point. To ensure that the process moves as quickly as possible, we must insist that companies switch to 100% CSPO as quickly as possible. At the very least, there is absolutely *no reason* why a company cannot be 100% CSPO via Greenpalm (the Book and Trade supply chain option) *today*. And where physical supply chains of CSPO exist, these companies should be purchasing it (and paying the premium), rather than meeting their commitment through Greenpalm. Otherwise, Greenpalm may undermine take-up of physical CSPO and present a disincentive to growers to get certified. The ultimate goal is, of course, for companies to purchase only Deforestation-Free 100% segregated CSPO. CSPO in itself does not sufficiently guarantee sustainability.

Another major issue with RSPO is rogue members who not only are deforesting (within and outside of the standard) but directly impacting wildlife such as tigers and orangutans (outside of the standard). The Complaints Process is being revised and there are new members on the panel including OLT and Sumatran Orangutan Society. However there is a lot of work to be done to see that these complaints are dealt with robustly.

Demand is increasing. A growing global population makes this inevitable. In other words, palm oil is here to stay and indeed increase. Since conventional production of palm oil represents the single greatest threat to the survival of the orangutan, the most important step we can take in order to save the orangutan is to ensure that this growing industry does not develop at the expense of the orangutan and its habitat. And this is indeed possible. World Resources Institute, through their Palm Oil Suitability Mapping Tool, have identified some 14 million hectares of non-forest land in Borneo alone that may be suitable for oil palm, which far exceeds projected requirements for expansion in that area. Additionally, increasing yields in existing plantations can minimise the need to expand into new areas. And yields are increasing in many plantations. It is important to point out that palm oil today is the highest yielding oilseed crop. On average, its yield is about 9 times that of the next highest yielding: soya. And if you consider maximum yields of palm oil vs maximum yields of soya, this results in as much as 20 times greater yield. In other words, if we were to replace palm oil with another oil, we could be facing deforestation rates for oils 9 to 20 times that of what we see today. This is one reason why OLT does not support a boycott of palm oil. We are not against palm oil; we are against deforestation for palm oil.

*See also [Why Boycotting Palm Oil Is Not The Way To Save Orangutans](#)*

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## ***What proportion of the Orangutan Land Trust's efforts are directed to protecting remaining habitat as opposed to the rehabilitation of rescued animals?***

Most of our work is with protecting the remaining habitat of orangutans so that they do not need to be rescued, or worse, that they perish. And this means me spending a lot more time in windowless meeting rooms in high-rise office buildings in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore and Jakarta trying to do everything I can to persuade the players in a huge global industry to embrace sustainability, and much less time amongst my beloved furry friends.

Orangutan Land Trust develops strategic partnerships to break the link between palm oil and deforestation (and orangutan extinction). These partners demonstrate their commitment in their practices on the ground and they also contribute to conservation activities that address the larger legacy of the industry. In many cases, this contribution may support providing an outlet for the rescued orangutans as previously described: river islands and large release areas.

## ***You must be an optimist to do what you do, but the threats to orangutans are very real. Taking the most objective view that you can, is the battle to save the species being won or lost?***

Like so many areas of conservation, it is often a matter of two steps forward, one step back. There is no time to be complacent; efforts need to be heightened to really make progress. I think the growing awareness of sustainability issues, and the responsibility of the private sector to have traceable, sustainable supply chains will have a great positive impact on ecosystems and biodiversity globally. The public expects the companies they buy from to not kill orangutans, clear rainforests or support human rights abuses. Campaigns to highlight popular brands that have not ensured these things are not associated with their products are causing a real uproar, and ethical and progressive companies will take the time to trace their supply chains before a campaign is launched against them.

Everyone in the supply chain, from the grower down to the consumer, can have a part in saving the orangutan, by insisting and ensuring that palm oil (and pulp and paper) is deforestation-free.

Attention to these matters among the private sector can also provide [an] incentive for the government to take a stronger role in the conservation of their biodiversity. Emerging mechanisms such as REDD+ can provide important conservation outcomes for biodiversity if managed properly.

*Michelle provided this excerpt from a previous article:*

Something I get asked everywhere I go is: "How long before orangutans are extinct in the wild?"

And I have heard experts and non-experts alike cite timelines of anywhere between 2 and 20 years before the orangutan is at least functionally extinct in the wild. I personally believe these predictions are inaccurate, and in the extreme cases, irresponsible and counter-productive. First of all, telling an audience that this species will be extinct in a few years results in an unwarranted feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. Such hyperbolic statements are often dismissed as fear-mongering, and the reputation of those who state it

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will diminish when the predictions prove wildly unfounded at the end of this timeline of doom. If indeed the orangutan is going to be extinct in say 3 years, then really, why even bother trying to save them today? Maybe conservation efforts would be better applied to a species that has a chance, people will reason. No, I do not believe the orangutan will be extinct in 5 years, 10 years or even 20 years, so long as current efforts such as those undertaken by OLT and BOS and others like them continue to be supported. I feel certain that in 20 years' time there will remain at least pockets of viable populations of orangutans enjoying protection, perhaps a few thousand in Mawas, another few thousand in Tanjung Puting for example, and hopefully more. But in this scenario, it remains that tens of thousands of orangutans including areas with viable populations elsewhere will perish unnaturally, and then it becomes a welfare issue as much as it is a conservation issue. This is what we should reasonably be concerned with—the immense loss of life that will take place if more is not done to prevent it. For those of you who like me have had the privilege of knowing at least one orangutan on an intimate level, and have made that connection and known the uniqueness and value of a single orangutan individual, I think you can understand why the unnecessary loss and suffering of thousands of orangutan individuals is so unbearable to consider.

## ***What are the most effective things that people in the main consumer countries can do to support orangutan survival?***

How to help

1. Ensure that your business practices do not negatively impact the ecosystems upon which orangutans depend, whether directly or indirectly.
2. Use smart consumerism: Insist that products using palm oil use only deforestation-free Certified Sustainable Palm Oil, purchase only wood and paper products that bear the FSC logo or similar, etc.
3. Support Orangutan Land Trust to provide sustainable, long-term solutions which protect the orangutan in the wild.
4. Become a Strategic Partner with Orangutan Land Trust to help achieve its objectives.

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*The following excerpt comes from an article written by Michelle that first appeared in EuroAsia magazine*

Orangutan Land Trust firmly believes that multi-stakeholder engagement is [the] best means to balance development aims with conservation aims without compromising principles. We recognize that countries like Indonesia and Malaysia have every right to develop economically and the private sector has the right to do business. While like Dr Seuss's Lorax, we speak for the trees (and the inhabitants of the forests), we believe the rights of all can be maintained through careful planning and the use of sustainable practices which avoid, minimize and mitigate environmental (and social) impacts

However a great deal of deforestation has already been caused and has ongoing impacts on the environment. Orangutan Land Trust would like to see the private sector companies responsible for such impacts to voluntarily begin to put right the wrongs of the past. Restoration of degraded areas, reforestation and afforestation and the establishment of wildlife corridors can all provide enormous benefits. Biodiversity bio-banking is another way to compensate for past activities and offers very high conservation outcomes on an ecosystem-wide basis, positively affecting not only biodiversity, but also climate change, water quality, communities, etc. Companies may contribute financially to support the organisations that are picking up the pieces left behind; some palm oil companies have paid for the ongoing care of orangutans who in the past had to be rescued from their concessions, supported by a commitment to put no other orangutans in danger in the future. In Indonesia, it is law that 4% of company profits must be fed back into CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) activities. Working with a group like Orangutan Land Trust can help ensure that the activities supported by a company can have the best outcomes. Based in America, the group 1% For the Planet encourages companies to give just this small percentage to support charitable activities that benefit the planet.

The private sector has a critical role in helping the global community achieve its Sustainable Development Goals. So where does the orangutan fit in with SDG? Consider that, in order to save the orangutan, the habitat of the orangutan must be saved. These forest ecosystems, some of the most complex on the planet, support an enormous amount of biodiversity. The forest, and the biodiversity within it, supply environmental services both locally and globally: potential for pharmaceutical prospecting, management of water systems and regulation of the water cycle, timber and non-timber forest products, livelihoods and sustenance for local communities and indigenous peoples, and mitigation of climate change, etc. Orangutans are "merely" and interchangeably a keystone species, flagship species, umbrella species and indicator species within the ecosystem they inhabit. Put simply, by saving the orangutan, you save the forest, and ultimately, save the planet.

Find out more at [www.forests4orangutans.org](http://www.forests4orangutans.org)