

April 22nd, 2014. The Tembak orangutan release

Dear friends,

Finally the day arrived that five of our orangutans from the Sintang Orangutan Center were able to climb back into the rain forest canopy of the Ribang Ayau forest in Tembak, the Dayak village that bravely continues to fight for their traditional way of living. And we hope that in the coming month several more orangutans will join them high up there in the tree crowns, exploring the three dimensional maze, learning about all the new smells and tastes and further developing their muscles, climbing and nest building skills.



Anyone of you who have been following our activities knows that achieving this milestone has not been easy. The financial issues, the status of the forest, the actions of the oil palm companies, the medical screening, the building of the necessary infrastructure, training of new local staff, the formal letters for each and every orangutan, etc.

But last Tuesday the day finally arrived that we could tick all the boxes and that the cars of the Ministry of Forestry and two other rented vehicles drove to the front of our Sintang Orangutan Center office. The orangutans all sensed that something special was about to happen. A German film team with the famous Frank Elstner worked hard to record all the steps that took place in swift succession to limit the stress for the orangutans. The first orangutan to be taken out of his cage at the center and to be

moved to a transport cage was Mamat. For me this was so symbolic. What an amazing tale of survival his story tells. Please read *Mamat arrival in Sintang for* the story of how he first arrived with us in Sintang or watch the [clip](http://vimeo.com/83583797#at=3) here (<http://vimeo.com/83583797#at=3>).

First I sat with Mamat, who was slowly stretching his now well-developed arms and legs. When he realized I was sitting against the bars of his facility he immediately came over and held my head to ensure we could see in each other's eyes up close. When I mentioned the word "kunci" (pronounced *koontye* and meaning keys) he immediately looked towards the clinic and started rattling the lock on his door. He learned a lot more than climbing during his time here! Once the door slid open he instantly reached for my outstretched arms and did not care about the many people standing around in forestry uniforms and equipped with big camera equipment. And when we put Mamat in his transport cage he just entered as I gently guided him, although I could see he had expected to go to the forest for another exercise day. Mamat just looked curiously at what else was happening around him in full trust that whatever it was it was going to be okay.



Then it was time for Jojo and Momo to enter their transport cage. They put up somewhat of a struggle but once inside with nice fruits and leaves they sat back eating and looking interested at all activity around them. Next was Joy, our nervous little girl that still self clings and bumps her head when she is inside s cage but who is such a great experienced climber when she is out in the forest. Last to join her in the

transport cage was Beno, the gentle male orangutan with the thick coat of shiny hair. That looks great but actually indicates that Beno is less active than other orangutans that tumble and roll more breaking off their hairs.

The already heavy cages with the healthy orangutans were carried by four people each to the Ministry of Forestry cars already waiting in front of our office building. Some last pictures were taken and I joined pak Hadiat, the head of the Sintang Forestry Nature Conservation office in his official car, and off we were towards Tembak, normally some three hours south of Sintang. But the road past the oil palm plantations was said to be in very poor condition, despite the help some of our supporters gave to keep it passable. So no guarantee on how long we would be on this trip.



During the journey the orangutans were all completely at ease, having no problem with the bumps in the road. We stopped several times to check on their condition and to give them some healthy snacks and water to drink. The long ride through the oil palms carried special symbolic value. Joy and Mamat were both oil palm victims... Then we got to the road leading to the Dayak villages, according many local people on purpose kept in the poorest possible condition so that the local people in desperation would give up their land to the oil palm companies so to at least have a way of reaching the city of Sintang. The cars of the Ministry of Forestry could not get through the extremely deep mud so we had to move the cages to the only car that could make it through the deep mud. The two kilometers of very bad road were quite a challenge for people, orangutans and car, but eventually we got through and soon reached the Tembak village.



Frank Elstner

When we entered the village every last person in the village, women and children included, seemed to run behind and follow our car with the orangutans, and at the church many more people were waiting to guide us up the path to the clinic. I carried Mamat, a healthy 24 kilograms, up the hill, which was given the heat not easy I must admit. But Adang, our head keeper of much smaller build was carrying Jojo, almost as heavy and Miun, the even smaller local keeper from Tembak was carrying 23 kilogram heavy Momo! But reaching the top of the hill and the front of the new clinic next to the orangutan forest did not mean we had made it yet...

Dayak gongs were pounded and in front of the clinic was a huge crowd gathered, awaiting our arrival! And the traditional sugar cane was hanging in a palm leaf gateway. The Dayaks were receiving the orangutans with full honor! The warriors and the girls danced in their traditional clothing and everybody looked at the new inhabitants of the Tembak village! But the dances took long and the traditional welcoming words at the gate and the singing to the six gods as well. Jojo got restless and we had to send both Jojo and Momo ahead to their holding facility in the forest. Mamat was good, watching the whole spectacle with great patience and interest. Then I was asked to take the Dayak sword to cut the sugar cane but instead I asked pak Hadiat, the head of the Ministry of Forestry nature conservation office in Sintang to do it. He was most pleased!



Then, together with Frank Elstner and his TV crew it was directly off to the forest. I think I saw some tears when Mamat took to the trees and especially when I told them he would soon come down again and back to me and then go up again and it happened to the second as I predicted. Frank was very happy with the special experience, but dark clouds were gathering and they had to go back to Sintang before the road would be no longer passable. After visiting the longhouse they did indeed get stuck for two hours in the mud on the way back and the crew on the back of the car together with my assistant Wisnu got soaking wet in the rain.

I spent time talking to the people of Tembak about the need to keep their distance and that the orangutans were not here for their amusement and that the rules of the clinic were there for a reason. I also spent time with Beno and Joy who were a bit timid initially at their new forest home. When it got dark we finally could go to the house of pak Nayau for a well-earned shower and some food. Then the elders of the village all came to the terrace of pak Nayau's house and we talked about the drought, the Illipe nut factory, the trip for tomorrow to go the Belimbing district for the sugar palm village hub preparation, and I answered so many questions about orangutans. They learned that the cheekpadders were the same species and that a normal orangutan suddenly could become a cheekpadder!



The night was cool, and the rice wine helped also to sleep very well. In the morning a whole new group was eagerly waiting to continue last night's meeting. Then we went to the location of the Illipe nut factory we are building with the Otter foundation. The

trees are all fruiting! With the failed rice harvest the income and food from the Illipe nut trees is going to be so important! Lots of technical stuff, no need to report here. Then breakfast and right after that back to the clinic and the orangutans!

We took Jojo, Momo, Mamat, Beno and Joy to the trees and wow did they climb! Mamat was exalted and within minutes was more than 30 meters high in the tree canopy! Beno climbed up to a good viewing point and started his usual observation routine. But when Mamat came towards him they resumed their usual play as if there was no difference in the forest they were in compared with the Baning forest where they had been together before in Sintang. The best climber of all however, moving swiftly through the trees turned out to be Joy! What superb climbing technique of this little girl that lived in the open sun on a garbage dump next to an open sewer for so many years! And a first nest! And she ate orchid leaves and shoots of the thorny rattan and other things I could not see clear enough!

Then I had to go the remote Belimbing district to the south of the Saran forest where our orangutans eventually will live in complete freedom, without the watching eyes of our technicians. What a road, or whatever you call this space with holes in between the trees! More ceremonies there and more issues to deal with. That night late we reached Sintang again, with hardly a voice left and kidneys ten inches lower in my back. I checked on the latest news of the orangutans, all well! Tired but satisfied I put my head to rest.



Many thanks to all of you who have contributed to making this possible! Orangutan Rescue, Adrie Bontekoe, Ecowarriors, Willy van Mensvoort, Liesbeth and so many more I cannot mention here one by one. Thanks for believing in our project. Father Jacques, Dudung and myself will keep you updated!

Willie Smits
24-4-2014

