

His name is Mamat

He is seven years old but is the weight of a 3 year old. His full set of teeth showing his age contrasts sharply with his small, skinny powerless limbs. For years he lived on a chicken farm near Singkawang in a very small cage in which he could not even stand. When Mamat arrived here in Sintang, that evening some two weeks ago, he had no light in his eyes. The Ministry of Forestry staff that brought him and our medical staff feared he would die that night.



This was how Mamat arrived in the Sintang Orangutan Center. Unable to move and without light in his eyes... The banana is hanging there so he would try to use his right leg, the only limb with a bit of movement left in it, to touch and eventually grab and pull the fruit off, although it took many weeks before he even could open his fingers slightly and have a chance to do so.

But Mamat did live till the morning light and he is more than just alive now four weeks after his arrival. I spent a few touching hours with Mamat this morning. Adang and Denny, the two orangutan keepers at the Sintang Orangutan Center that work most with Mamat, eagerly took me to his facility where he was lying on a bed of fresh forest leaves, his eyes lighting up when he saw us coming. He can already move his legs now, they told me, and he has for the first time rolled over!

I sit beside Mamat, and a bit uncertain, he takes notice of me, slowly turning his head towards me. But then that typical moment of recognition when our eyes connect! He moves his lips just this bit and with the tiniest change in his eyes I can see that he sees no danger in me and shows interest! Denny films while I make my acquaintance with Mamat.

I slowly and steadily move my hand towards his head, making sure he is okay with it. Then I touch and massage the spot just underneath his small right ear and at the back of his lower jaw. The orangutan's sweet spot! I gently stroke and lightly massage Mamat with my fingers. Soon he is telling me with his eyes where the spot on his back is that he wants to have massaged. When I stop and talk about his treatment to the orangutan technicians something amazing happens! He pulls his arms underneath himself and pushes himself up towards me, his underlip slightly extended, asking me to talk to him again. I bend toward him and we look deep into each other's eyes with a mere centimeter between us, and we are in a world of our own.... No sound anymore of the people in the back building the new clinic, no more noisy motorbikes in the distance, no people talking, no Jojo and Juvi rambling in the cage next door, no birds or insects to be heard, just this deep silent look in each other's eyes....



After a while I ask Adang to show me how he is treating Mamat's paralyzed limbs. Adang carefully stretches Mamat's fingers until I can see from his eyes and lips and the movement of his head that he is hurting. A rubber toy to hold is placed in the now somewhat stretched hand. Very good! I show Adang how he can best massage Mamat and I feel warm and fuzzy to see with

how much love Adang treats this poor, extremely skinny, orangutan. Mamat has virtually no muscles or meat. He is very malnourished, so doctor Sri has him on a special diet enriched with vitamins.

Time to look at Penai, another long tortured female orangutan. She has gained a lot of weight over the last two months and moves swiftly through her facility. She has passed all medical tests and her eyes and hair shine in the sun coming through the leaves above her large enclosure. Today we want to introduce her to the two rambling girls a few cages down the facility. We have made a special tunnel for them to move freely from one cage to the other when we open the different compartments. First we try to give Penai the chance to go to the cage of Jojo and Juvi but she is not so certain, so we turn it around and in no time Jojo and Juvi are in Penai's part of the large facility. Penai squeak kisses a lot and tries to hit Jojo on her head. But Jojo does not care and keeps approaching Penai in the top of the facility. When Penai hits a bit harder Juvi immediately comes to support Jojo! So we decide to let Jojo have some time by herself and leave Juvi and Penai together. Much better!

The two of them quietly observe each other until Juvi takes the initiative and establishes her dominance, despite timid Penai being much bigger. Tomorrow we will try again and for now we get everyone back to their trusted places. Jojo goes back to her foot thumb sucking and Juvi tries the new swings that have just been strung through their facility. Mamat has been observing the introduction from his bed of leaves.

After a meeting at the terrace of the Kobus foundation with some Dayaks from the Tembak village I go back to Mamat. His lower lip moves excitedly and I enter his facility and on purpose sit down a few meters away from him. Amazing! With all his strength he slowly starts to roll and crawl towards me with the crooked arms underneath him. I can see the tears in Denny's eyes when Mamat sits up by himself to reach me for the first time! Wow! This is what motivation can do! His eyes shine! Mamat knows he is on the right path. I cannot wait to see him learn to climb in the trees again! I check his spine and tickle him in various places. All reactions on touch are there. I think he will make it! I actually start believing that Mamat will one day join other orangutans to the beautiful Saran forest near the Dayak village of Tembak!



Mamat is laughing! I wonder how long he has not done this... With the slightest eye and head movements he steers me to the ticklish spots, just like human toddlers do.

With warm feelings in my heart I walk back to the Kobus Foundation to meet with Nico Tatontos, the Masarang sugar palm instructor who has just come back from another village where the local people asked for our help against the oil palms, the common enemy of many local people and the orangutans. Just helping Mamat recover and climb the trees again is not going to do the job of giving him and the Dayaks a sustainable future. But what an inspiration this young fellow is! His hopeful eyes and first struggling movements on the path to a better future provide me with all the strength I need to work on developing integrated sustainable solutions for his and our future.

Willie Smits,
Sintang, 3-10-2012

Update on Mamat December 2012



Mamat is curious again! His eyes shine again after many long lonely dark hours in the badly smelling chicken cage amongst the thousands of chicken he saw being removed violently, year after year.



Every day a millimeter... Slowly but surely Mamat's fingers start to open up! He knows that Adang's actions with the massage and toys are giving results.



Mamat's fingers are still crooked but even while still bent he starts to use them to pull himself up again! You can see the determination in his eyes!



There was no strength left in Mamat's arms a month ago. All he could do was lay on his bed of leaves and glance with despair and sadness in his eyes. We were happy with his first attempts to try to roll over! And now...! With his emaciated legs he for the first time managed to climb on this log and sit by himself! This transformation is almost miraculous!

Latest news? He was seen putting a towel over his head using his arms and legs!

Here is a picture of Mamat during his first attempts at actually using his right leg, the only somewhat functioning limb after the many years of malnutrition. The forest police that brought Mamat expected him to die that night, but our vet Drh. Sriyanto, pulled him through! Mamat is still emaciated and has hardly any muscle mass left but has started gaining some weight now.



Beneath you can see doctor Sriyanto working with two professional Dutch physiotherapists of the SOMOI foundation, an organization that helps children with difficulties here in the hospital in Sintang. The help from Esther and Nicky was instrumental in getting Mamat's limbs moving again, each day a millimeter more.



This picture tells it all. Look at the intense expression in Mamat's eyes while he clings on with the one already functioning finger and with his crooked feet. Note how he climbs using his teeth to reach the tempting fruits!

This fighter is on his way back to the forest!!

