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Perspective

Kill, incarcerate, or liberate? Ethics and alternatives to orangutan rehabilitation

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ABSTRACT

Despite its high cost and debatable conservation value, orangutan rehabilitation and reintroduction (R&R) continues. Drawing on qualitative research with orangutan conservationists, this paper argues that a central reason why R&R practitioners undertake this activity is a view that the alternatives, killing orangutan orphans or keeping them in captivity, are practically or ethically unacceptable. However, questions remain over whether orphans might be better off in captivity than in the wild, and why orphans appear to attract more attention and support than wild orangutans. In evaluating these questions, practitioners must weigh up obligations to individuals and larger units, displaced and wild orangutans (the former visible, and the latter abstract), and properties of orangutans such as their wildness, welfare, and autonomy. As advocates of compassionate conservation have highlighted, similar ethical dilemmas arise in the conservation of other species.

1. Introduction

Rehabilitation and reintroduction (R&R) involves helping displaced or orphaned animals become healthy and socially and ecologically capable of surviving with greater independence, before release into the wild (Beck et al., 2007). With orangutans (*Pongo* spp.), R&R first began in the 1960s, and today is undertaken at approximately 13 R&R projects (Table 1, Supplementary material). R&R may have conservation value—for example, as a tool for community education, facilitating forest protection, curbing illegal trade, and replenishing wild populations. However, these arguments are often challenged in the case of orangutan R&R, particularly on the grounds that large viable populations remain in the wild, especially on Borneo (Utami Atmoko et al., 2017), and post-release survival is potentially poor (Section 4). Furthermore, various benefits such as community education and providing a home for confiscated animals could as easily be achieved with sanctuaries providing lifelong care rather than R&R (see Gipps, 1991; Lardoux-Gilloux, 1995; Rijksen and Meijaard, 1999; Rijksen, 2001; Russon, 2009; Trayford, 2013; Palmer, 2018, for reviews of orangutan R&R, and Teleki, 2001; Cheyne, 2009; Beck, 2010; Beck, 2016; Beck, 2018; Trayford and Farmer, 2013; Guy et al., 2014; and Humle and Farmer, 2015 for other primates). R&R costs approximately \$44k per orangutan over an orangutan's lifetime (about 12 times as much as forest protection), and is therefore a less cost-effective long-term conservation strategy than habitat protection (Wilson et al., 2014). For these reasons, attendees of

a public discussion hosted by the World Land Trust in London in WLT (2011) overwhelmingly rejected the motion that “[e]ven with limited funding available, reintroduction of captive orangutans is as important for their conservation as habitat protection.”

Despite this apparent consensus that orangutan reintroduction is less important than other conservation activities, it shows no sign of slowing, with at least three new rehabilitation centers opening since 2015 (Table 1, Supplementary material), and perhaps a quarter (Meijaard, 2014), or even half (Wilson et al., 2014), of the annual Indonesian orangutan conservation budget going to R&R (about US \$20m annually, with at least half coming from NGOs rather than the government: Meijaard, 2014). This paper examines why, regardless of its expense and debatable conservation value, orangutan R&R will likely continue. Drawing on qualitative research with orangutan conservation practitioners, I argue that R&R is often undertaken primarily because it is viewed as the only acceptable option for dealing with orangutan orphans—the main alternatives being euthanasia or lifelong captivity. However, questions remain over whether orphans might be better off in captivity than in the wild, and why orphans appear to attract more attention and support than wild orangutans. This paper explores various perspectives held within the orangutan conservation community on whether there is an acceptable, or preferable, alternative to R&R, and how to balance ethical obligations towards displaced and wild orangutans.

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2. Methods

Research involved interviews with orangutan conservation and welfare practitioners, especially those involved in R&R and with some decision-making capacity, such as non-governmental organization (NGO) directors, R&R project managers, donors, and researchers. In-depth interviews in person or over Skype/phone were conducted with 81 participants. A further three responded to questions by email, 10 participated in short interviews or other correspondence, and seven informally discussed information pertinent to the research. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, following a general structure but allowing flexibility to pursue unexpected topics as they arose. First participants were individuals known to be key players in orangutan conservation, such as NGO directors and researchers. Further participants were recruited opportunistically (e.g., while visiting projects), and through recommendations from other participants and “theoretical sampling”: selecting participants for what they would likely contribute to the project, such as offering contrary views or new areas of expertise (Orne and Bell, 2015, p. 69). Individuals with a significant public presence (e.g., NGO directors, many of whom appear in popular media such as documentaries) were informed that they would not be anonymized, though they could choose for specific comments to be anonymized or not included, and others (e.g., vets, field staff, donors) were offered the option of remaining anonymous. Anonymized comments are referenced as “anon.” A list of the 65 named interviewees is included in the Supplementary material.

Research also involved participant-observation at events in the UK and Southeast Asia (e.g., a private fundraising meeting, meetings of practitioners, and public fundraising events and lectures). Between May and August, 2016, visits of 1–5 days were paid to orangutan conservation projects on Borneo and Sumatra, including six rehabilitation centers, three release sites, three orangutan tourism and research projects, and one NGO-owned forest. Arguments about orangutan R&R were examined in both peer-reviewed literature and popular media (e.g., blogs, books, documentaries, and social media). This research was approved by the University College London Department of Anthropology Ethics and Fieldwork Committee and the Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education of the Republic of Indonesia (RISTEK, 173/SIP/FRP/E5/Dit.KI/V/2016).

3. Euthanasia

Even 16 individuals with substantial involvement in conducting, funding, studying, or otherwise supporting R&R compared habitat protection favorably to R&R in terms of cost-effectiveness or its ability to solve the underlying cause of orangutan endangerment. R&R was acknowledged as a “band-aid on the problem” (Gail Campbell-Smith, 2016-06-07), much like “paracetamol” for the flu (Karmelee Sanchez, 2016-06-09), or a “fire brigade [...] You’re always better off preventing fires than you are fighting them” (Nigel Hicks, 2015-12-09). For 23 participants (20 of whom were substantially involved in R&R), ethical obligations or a lack of suitable alternatives were central reasons for viewing R&R as worthwhile. As summarized by James Robins (2016-04-08), formerly director of the Tabin orangutan reintroduction project in Sabah, R&R is “clearly not as cost-effective as habitat protection [...] but that’s not what motivates a lot of people working in the industry [...] I think, particularly from my point of view, what do we do with these animals, you know?” The seven participants involved in R&R who placed greatest emphasis on its conservation value were involved in projects on Sumatra rather than Borneo (the difference between R&R on the two islands is beyond the scope of this paper).

There are two main alternatives to R&R: killing orphaned orangutans, or keeping them in lifelong captivity (Harcourt, 1987; Beck, 2010; Moore et al., 2014). “Dumping” orphaned orangutans into the wild without undergoing necessary rehabilitation could be considered ethically “pretty much the same as euthanasia” (Sanchez), since the

purpose of rehabilitation is to assist orangutans that would otherwise have a slim chance of survival; however, it could also be viewed as comparable to releasing orangutans with minimal post-release support, which could be justified as giving orangutans “death with dignity” (Section 4). In either case, although “dumping” represents a distinct management technique – which is sometimes used for other species, such as gibbons (Palmer, 2018) – it involves similar ethical issues to euthanasia and R&R. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss “dumping” in detail.

Euthanasia was widely endorsed for obviously suffering orangutans, such as those with serious diseases. The issue of disease containment was also brought up in relation to orangutans with tuberculosis, specifically at Samboja Lestari in East Kalimantan (Table 1, Supplementary material), which housed 44 orangutans with TB during my visit (Agus Irwanto, 2016-06-30). However, several practitioners, drawing on cases from two rehabilitation centers, indicated that government permission to euthanize even “deserving cases” (anon) in Indonesia is rarely granted (see also Rouxel, 2012). Four participants discussed the possibility that some groups may need to consider killing orangutans that cannot be released, even those that do not obviously suffer. This idea was proposed as a way of freeing up resources to spend on those that can be released, or because it might be “in the interest of the animal’s wellbeing to kill it” rather than keep it in “inhumane” or overcrowded conditions in rescue centers for its whole life (Pokras, in comments on Lindburg, 1995, p. 169; see also Karesh, 1995; Moore et al., 2014). (Invoking similar logic, two participants argued that even orangutans with dubious survival skills would be better off if “given a chance” in the wild than left to suffer in a small cage.) Certainly, conditions in orangutan rehabilitation centers are generally poor, with many cages smaller than those recommended for laboratory-housed apes (Trayford, 2013, p. 111). One participant was open to the possibility of euthanizing all displaced orangutans, on the grounds that they are “biologically a dead end.” However, the remaining participants voiced only objections to the idea of euthanizing healthy orangutan orphans.

Some objections to euthanasia were practical: not only is it currently illegal in Indonesia, and would not solve the underlying problem, but “the social backlash overseas would be enormous” (Graham Usher, 2016-07-15; similar point voiced by four others). Furthermore, in Indonesia and Malaysia “how are we going to stop people from killing orangutans if the government or the NGOs or general society in the world decides that this is the right thing to do? Forget about ever stopping the problem” (Sanchez; similar point made by one other). Ethical justifications were also frequently cited, most prominently the idea that “we have a moral responsibility to do something about these animals that we’ve displaced” (Graham Banes, 2016-02-17). This idea references notions of justice and fairness: we must “take responsibility” (Biruté Galdikas, 2016-06-16), since “it’s not their fault they’ve ended up in this horrific situation” (Susan Cheyne, 2015-10-26), and they therefore “deserve extra special treatment” (Robins; similar argument made by three more). The principle of righting humanity’s wrongs does not necessarily entail viewing orangutans as possessing rights (e.g., to life, or to freedom), since its primary goal is atoning for guilt about our treatment of other species (Cribb et al., 2014, p. 5). However, several individuals involved in orangutan conservation and R&R are known for their public support for great ape rights (e.g., Biruté Galdikas, Gary Shapiro, Leif Cocks, Richard Zimmerman), and others explicitly voiced the idea that orangutans deserve “a right to life, and the right to not be impeded by human activity” (Michelle Desilets, 2015-11-03), or spoke of “animals as people” (Signe Preuschoft, 2016-06-25). Such views were not only expressed by animal welfare or rights advocates but also by some self-described conservationists, such as Erik Meijaard (“an orangutan as a great ape has rights, a right to live that I value very highly”: 2015-09-01) and Ian Singleton, who described orangutans as “people” (2016-07-12).

Five participants explicitly indicated that they care for all animals equally, or have particular affection for species less closely related to

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