

Colne Valley News – August 2017



Project Orangutan and Project Borneo

We at Colne Valley Vets are delighted to have provided supplies for one of our clients, Lyn Pendle, to take with her to the Matang Wildlife Centre in the Kubah National Park, Sarawak. Lyn has just returned from her third volunteering trip to the centre which takes in many species including rescued orangutans, sun bears, macaque monkeys, Borneo gibbons, clouded leopards, and Binturongs. All of them have either been used in the tourist trade, handed in as pets (it is illegal in Sarawak to keep orangutans), or found when their habitat has been lost. Even a crocodile was brought in by the fire brigade!

Each fortnight, the project takes 8 - 12 volunteers who range in age from 18 to 70 years old, and on Lyn's last trip came from America, Australia, Canada, Holland, Germany, and New Zealand as well as the UK. Volunteering in the tropical rain forest is not for the faint-hearted as it is very hot and humid. The accommodation is not luxurious and there is no hot water, air conditioning or internet, although mobile 'phone coverage is very good. Volunteers can either cook for themselves or one of the local women will prepare an evening meal. It is, however, very enjoyable and does enable being really close to some amazing animals.

Each day, the volunteers work in one of three groups: orangutans, sun bears and quarantine. When working with the orangutans, face masks must be worn as they are so susceptible to human diseases. The first task is to put food into their outside enclosures, which can involve climbing to the top of the huge climbing frames to leave food there. Next, any plastic bottles, fabric, jute sacks etc from enrichment (see later) are tidied away. Once the volunteers are safely out of the enclosure, the orangutans are let out for breakfast. Then there is the task of cleaning their night

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dens: scooping poo, hosing, scrubbing, and using a squeezy mop on the floor to remove as much water as possible.

There are two sun bear enclosures. Wearing wellington boots and long socks is very important to stop grass cuts and wellie rash. The volunteers put out food and also dog biscuits, porridge, honey and peanut butter. Porridge, honey and peanut butter are smeared as high up the trees as possible to make the bears climb and work for their food. Sun bears seem to have a one-track mind, and spend much time foraging for food using their long tongues and sharp claws to search it out. Cleaning the bears' night dens is Lyn's least favourite part of the job as their poo really stinks.

When working in the quarantine group, the cage is first cleaned, then food is put into it. Once the new occupants have been safely moved to their next home cage, the procedure is repeated. In quarantine on Lyn's last trip were both pig-tailed and long-tailed macaques, Borneo gibbons, two Binturongs and three sun bears as well as a five-month-old baby Orangutan and a baby slow loris. One of the big problems the project has is being able to neuter the macaques: permission is needed from the government before this can be done but, once granted, some of the long-tailed macaques are moved out to an island in the local river where they are supported by a daily food run.

In the afternoons, there is a variety of jobs, the main one being enrichment. This involves making things like fruit-juice-flavoured ice pops containing tapioca leaves, sunflowers seeds, peanuts and raisins - two litre bottles for the orangutans and sun bears, and 500ml bottles for the other primates. The volunteers also make flavoured porridge or popcorn, mixed with fruit and seeds before wrapping in large leaves and sewing into fabric or cut up jute sacks. These are then all frozen. It is not unusual to see a welly-clad volunteer pushing a wheelbarrow along the paths to and from the freezers or to the outside enclosures. Other tasks involve going into the rain forest looking for large branches to decorate night dens and bamboo to stuff with porridge, and painting fences, gates, enclosures, and orangutan climbing frames. In the case of the alpha male orangutan Aman, a regular task is to re-concrete his outside enclosure steps or retaining wall as he insists on rearranging them.

Volunteers only work Monday to Friday, so they have time at weekends to visit other National parks such as Bako where there are proboscis monkeys and silver leaf langur monkeys, as well as wild pigs and other flora and fauna. Alternatively, they may go into Kuching or 'Cat City', the capital of Sarawak, to look around and have a hot shower.

This year, Lyn took her new camera and managed to take some lovely pictures of Ganti and her 8 year old son, the resident semi-wild orangutans (image at start). The centre does not breed animals but sometimes accidents occur, or the animals take things into their own hands. Ganti is pregnant again and due to give birth soon. Also, Tingsan had a baby in the spring but unfortunately could not feed him so young Triton is being hand-reared (image below) which requires much work and commitment from Tasha, Bron and Catherine the vet, taking it in turns to sleep in the clinic to give him his night feeds.

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It costs approximately £10,000 a month to feed over 50 animals, a not inconsiderable sum to find - you cannot tell a 140kg alpha male orangutan that there is no breakfast, so fund raising is very important. Currently, the main sources of income are the volunteer programme, a trip called 'Tribes and Orangutans', and half the profits from a very popular bar in Kuching called, appropriately enough, 'The Monkee Bar'. The latest venture, the 'Bear Garden' bar, also serves vegetarian snacks and, again, half of the profits will go to the project.

Lyn would very much like to go to Matang again: the full-time staff, both local Ibans and westerners, are wonderful, very knowledgeable, dedicated and great fun. She enjoys watching and working with the animals and helping make their lives a little bit better. Accommodation for the animals is not like the zoo enclosures in the UK, America or Australia: standards are very different and everything costs so much to build. The enclosure for Peter, the third Alpha male orangutan at the centre, cost over £30,000, yet it is nothing special, just very secure to keep both him and the public safe.

Back in the UK, Lyn does presentations about the centre as her contribution towards raising funds for the project, and is happy for anyone who would like a talk to contact her.



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