



Sequence of Orangutan crossing from right to left caught on video camera trap on June 23, 2020 in Sungei Pin, Kinabatangan.

Symbol of visionary connectivity restoration

Kan Yaw Chong

THE first bridge built by an oil palm plantation in Sabah recorded five orangutan crossings in eight months. Utter joy erupted at Sawit Kinabalu's 2,632ha Sungei Pin Estate Conservation Area, Kinabatangan, on June 23 when video images captured "the most beautiful" of the five crossings, believed involving three different Orangutans.

"It was the greatest excitement when we had that one on a bridge that was built on Oct 21-23, 2019," Orangutan researcher Dr Felicity Oram exuded.

"We didn't expect to get the results so quickly," said a jubilant Philipa Mojilis, Manager of State-owned Sawit Kinabalu Corporate Communication Unit.

Dr Felicity, a key driver in this connectivity restoration project, agreed.

"It is quite a rare event to be able to capture an Orangutan actually using a bridge like that on video, which is something we have been trying to do on my side as an Orangutan researcher for a long time.

"What makes this fantastic thing happen was a process of very bonded collaboration between Sawit Kinabalu and us (Pongo Alliance's skill set on conservation practitioners like Dr John Payne and Hutan) that helped us capture this lucky image," she noted.

Raising hope

"I think it is tremendous, it is very positive and very encouraging to our collaboration with Sawit Kinabalu because whatever commitment, whatever trust, whatever collaboration they have given us to do this together we can start to see a clear case of connectivity restoration which they have invested in.

"It is showing some results, it gives me hope – someone who is still very young and upcoming in the world of conservation," said Melaka-hailed Pravind Segaran, a Masters degree student at UMS under the supervision of Dr Felicity.

But this ecstatic result is actually a culmination of Sawit's reforestation of 2,632 ha Sungei Pin Conservation Area with flood resistant species like Sepat that started 17 years ago in 2003, when, believe it or not, this writer was there and I returned last week all fired up about the latest outcome!

Noticeable change in mindset

A positive note is there has been a perceptible change of mindset among planters in Kinabatangan, perhaps best typified by what Sungei Pin Estate Manager, Mohd Muszam Syah, who conceded:

"Years ago when I was posted in Jambongan Estate, we cut the trees but here we must protect, we must preserve and I love it so the collaboration with Pongo Alliance is very interesting because it's not

● First of a series

just protecting the wildlife and the forests but also a benefit to our workers," he said, citing the awareness program and a growing corp of trained forest rangers and Honorary Wildlife Wardens.

"It gives them the opportunity to learn. So I hope this project is continuous, maybe not just here but a future I hope where we can see more and more plantation growers to join the project," Muazam wished.

"For us, it's a commitment with the vision of our Managing Director (Masri Pudin) to the projects starting 2003."

Positive mood on visionary company

The positive mood among Sawit's ranks is infectious, aptly transmitted by Nazrin Epizal Ma'mun, Acting Manager of Agronomy: "I am very happy, I am very proud of Sawit (Kinabalu) because they have done something that is more visionary than many!"

Dr Felicity agrees wholeheartedly with this visionary tribute to Sawit, especially its practical openness to connectivity restoration which she says is really the top dog corporate quality that decides the destiny of the orangutan populations in Kinabatangan.

"I guess what the video images symbolise is the restoration of connectivity, that's what it shows, it is a symbol of the interest in Sawit Kinabalu in making that kind of connectivity happen, it is a demonstration of that kind of commitment to want to have a connected landscape," Felicity said.

Magic window to what's needed

"How the Orangutan is using the bridge is a magic window for us because for researchers we always wonder – do they use it the way we think?" she asked.

Yes, it's a magical sight that excites optimism because it surprised everyone how quickly it has happened.

"It is really great because it is an indication that it is really needed. If you ask somebody to make an investment, you always like the idea that it is useful."

This particular bridge is clearly useful.

But is there a bigger futuristic concern beyond this flash of excitement and big deal? Yes.

Zeal and caution on future of Orangutans

When asked if she shares primatologist, Dr Marc Ancrenaz's optimism on the future survival of Sabah's Orangutan once expressed to me, Dr Felicity showed her trade mark balance between zeal and caution.

"With the co-operation of the oil palm estates, yes. Without no, because



Sawit Kinabalu staff celebrate the bridge success on site in Sungei Pin. 7th from left is Philipa Mojilis. Note bridge at background.

Orangutan particularly the males have to move across the landscapes.

"If the door is not open for them to do that their long term is going to be inbreeding in smaller and smaller places. I am not talking about tomorrow but the long-term view is not good. It's the thing I say on top of everything."

Small wonder Dr Felicity kept highlighting and repeating Sawit Kinabalu's openness to her, Pongo Alliance, Hutan and its extra receptiveness to what really counts – openness to connectivity restoration.

Grasp inert need of male Orangutan to travel a lot

Essentially, that means grasping the inert need of the Oangutan to move around, to travel far and wide across the landscape, particularly the male Orangutans, she said.

In fact, if you are curious what the job description of a male Orangutan is, Dr Felicity is sure of one thing: "If you are a male Orangutan, your job in life is to move around when you are grown up."

"We have learned from genetic studies and long-term studies of here by Hutan for

24 years in the forests that it's the females that stay in one location and raise their babies from zero to 15 in the forests and then the males may stay around a little bit then they move to another one and another location, they are not involved in raising their babies, that's the females' job.

"So when the males are just becoming adults they move around a lot and also when they become mature and flanged with flappy cheek pads, various studies here and elsewhere show there is an indication that females like the ones with bigger flanges – that's an attractive male in the Orangutan world," Dr Felicity said.

Most sightings of Orangutan far from forests are males

"So when we were in the process of studying the Orangutan in the past year-and-a-half with Pongo Alliance, Pravind and myself, most of the sighting records of Orangutan that are far from the forests within 20km from the forests are all males.

"One thing that we have learnt over time in the study of Orangutan in Kinabatangan is that not only orangutans need to travel far to move between the sparse population of maybe between two orangutans per kilometre and between that the females with clusters of related females, the males move between because what they have a loose community structure," she said.

This astute understanding of orangutan travel behaviour is the key to Dr Felicity's keen interest in pulling the bridge across the river Sungei Pin from a small Pocket of original forest in Bukit Durian.

Males will cross plantation to see females

"When you have taken most of the forests away and left with a little bit of forests here and a little bit of forests there, what we are beginning to see in this project is an idea that's not a problem for the orangutan which still tries to maintain their community structure just as if there was a big forest when they are crossing an oil palm plantation to this small forest pocket (Bukit Durian) where the female lives," Dr Felicity explained.

Ah, yes indeed, there is a healthy female with a baby living in Bukit Durian forest pocket. Both Pravind and Felicity confessed they had not seen the mother and child but Sawit workers had picture of her and the baby.

Who is the 'this' caught crossing the bridge?

But here is the question: Who was caught crossing the bridge strapped to a massive fig tree on the Bukit Durian side of Sungei Pin Conservation Area on June 23, 2020?

"It's a macho male just growing his

flanges so he's becoming big, it went one direction away from Bukit Durian in the afternoon of June 22, wandered around a bit, stayed overnight and came back to Bukit Durian the next morning.

"That's pretty, we don't know what's going on in his mind but it's not unusual for male Orangutan to do that kind of thing. They would go to a new place in the afternoon, check it out, then move around."

So knowing full well in a fragmented forest landscape of Kinabatangan that males are still determined to cross oil palms to pockets of forest where females live, Dr Felicity said:

"The most important thing is that we need collaboration with the oil palm plantation owners and growers because in order to maintain the community structure, most of the land is oil palm so that those males need to be able to pass by. And what we are finding out is that for the most part they do on their own without anybody knowing," she noted.

Spectre of decline in Kinabatangan without oil palm support

"So, now what we are looking at is a situation in Kinabatangan is without the support of oil palm growers we probably won't have a viable population any more. They will become more and more little islands and you won't have good reproduction and good orangutan community structure.

"Without plantations as key players and key participants we will have continued decline so really the goal here is to work together to address this challenge," Dr Felicity said.

As far as *Daily Express* is concerned, Sawit Kinabalu has scored a high distinction in this reputational investment and Dr Felicity has rightly paid Sawit the deserved tribute.

"I have to say right from the beginning, from the first time we met with Sawit Kinabalu they were very open to have us come and see their areas, they lent their staff to look around and very interested in what we were finding and we were very interested in what they were observing.

"Sawit was not only very open to building their bridge but also very open to investing on the best materials. The actual camera trap that caught that image is a camera trap that that Sawit Kinabalu bought, they took the initiative to buy a relatively cheap one so that they could get it installed quickly.

"We lent our expertise on camera traps, Sawit lent their machine shop and work together for a good casing that is macaque-proof and rain-proof and all the images we have so far are from Sawit Kinabalu cameras," Dr Felicity paid tribute to a more than willing investor in connectivity restoration.



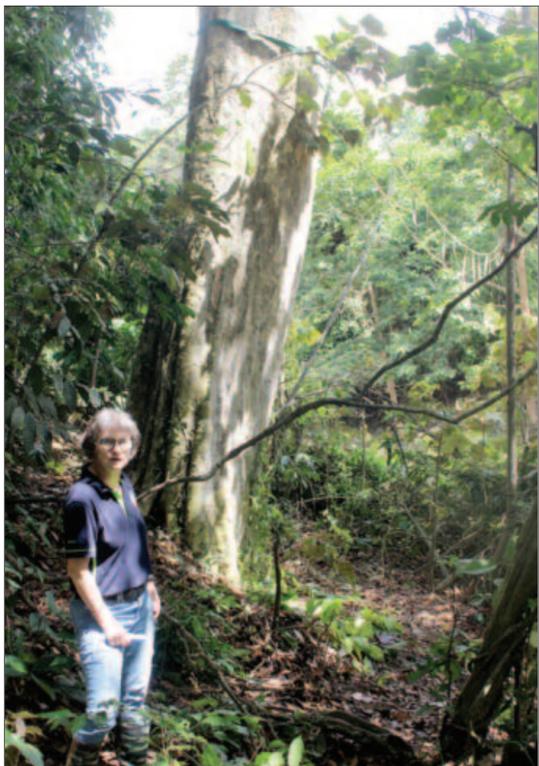
Md Muazam



Pravind



Nazrin



Dr Felicity showing how the bridge is strapped to a massive fig tree.



Close-up of the bridge over Sungei Pin.

Tale of Sawit's quick Orangutan success

■ Second of a series

Kan Yaw Chong

SAWIT Kinabalu is the first-ever oil palm company in Sabah that invested in an Orangutan bridge which quickly returned a big success, Orangutan researcher Dr Felicity Oram confirmed.

Built on Oct 23, 2019 with the help of experts from Hutan – a key partner of Pongo Alliance with vast experience on such bridges since 2004 – the faster than expected results surprised them all.

Just 26 days after being set up, the bridge over Sungei Pin recorded the first of five crossings within eight months.

But it was on June 23 this year that video camera trap captured the best and most amazing bridge walk of a newly-flanged male!

Top dog message – Born free

So what is the top dog message which Dr Felicity and Sawit are trying to strike home to plantations, businesses, NGOs, the people of Sabah and politicians in the established powers?

Born free – as free as the wind blows! Return to the male orangutans of Kinabatangan their once unfettered freedom to travel far and wide across the entire flood plain landscape.

Remember history, Felicity reminded everybody.

Only 700 left

The orangutan population of Kinabatangan now counts only 700 or just 10pc of what it used to be, she noted.

That means their count once stood at 7,000 – what a population crash actually.

“The important thing is when you have a population only 700 or so left that’s about 10pc of what we used to have. Every single individual becomes very important, so even if one orangutan crossing once every three years it is still very important,” Dr Felicity said.

Any further decline without open supportive intervention on connectivity restoration at the big landscape level may doom them, however much she likes zeal and optimism.

“I am not talking about tomorrow,” she said.

Reason for ecstasy

But five crossings in eight months at Sungei Pin?

No wonder there was such excitement at Sawit.

“She (Dr Felicity) has built many bridges but it’s in Sawit Kinabalu that actually has results that you didn’t expect to happen so early so soon,” exuded Philipa Mojilis, Manager, Corporate Communication Unit.

Felicity conceded she had her past disappointments:

“We didn’t have camera traps on every single bridge so we don’t have this kind of commitment like Sawit to monitor every single bridge either.

“But I only know one time I put a camera trap on a bridge at the Menanggal River in Sukau. I waited three years still I didn’t get one image but this one surprised me – just taking 26 days!”

Forces behind quick success

So what explains this extraordinary success at Sungei Pin?

What you know and where you put the bridge counts, she said.

“First of all we looked at the pattern of nests and we could see orangutans were trapped on one side of the river, they couldn’t cross,” she said,

“Then we noticed there were quite a number of nests around, that’s an indication that males are coming to that area and say: ‘I would like to cross but I can’t,’” Felicity guessed what the ape might be thinking.

Pattern of nests and sighting

“So where there are clumps of nests (this writer saw three clumps atop a 50ft tall tree just 10 metres from the river bank) we think that might be where they are choosing a place to cross.

“Besides looking at the pattern of nests,

we also set up a WhatsApp group within the plantation to report sighting so that we had an idea of where the Orangutans were being seen and quite early on it appeared that the Orangutan would like to cross that Sungei Pin at Bukit Durian but could not.”

When ficus trees are Orangutan restaurants

Next, we tried to look for trees that an orangutan would look on the other side of the bank and say: ‘I would like to be over there’ – like the ficus (fig) tree you saw (yes, a towering tree with a mighty trunk),” Dr Felicity explained.

“Ficus trees are really social – they are like restaurants to orangutans,” she noted.

“Orangutans like to congregate actually on ficus trees – the only place where more than one family will eat in the same tree,” she said.

“So we try to choose trees that they are going to use – places where they want to cross, to make them feel more secure.”

“Next, we try to pick a place where it is the shortest span because orangutans can’t swim so they have quite a lot of fear of being over water so we try to choose places where it’s not a big span,” Dr Felicity elaborated.

On the other hand, however, as important as ficus are to orangutans, it is a misconception that they eat only fruits, Dr Felicity said.

Figs first but...

“It’s true that orangutan eat mostly fruits as 60pc of their diet is fruits so if they are across at Bukit Durian and there is a ficus tree with fruits in it they are going to eat that first.”

But the thing is every day about 25% of their diet is leaves because that’s where



Dr Felicity Oram and Masters student Pravidan Segaran at Sg Pin's Bukit Durian forest patch where the bridge is located.

their protein comes from.”

“So the idea that they only eat fruits is not correct and the idea that they only eat figs is also not correct either,” she said.

“Because they eat many, many species, they can’t have a mono species forest, they are big animals,” Dr Felicity noted, citing Bukit Durian, from where the bridge has been pulled across to the other side of Sungei Pin.

Small pockets of forests matter

“That’s one thing about these small patches of forests like Bukit Durian in a plantation that have been left behind where evidently a female with an infant is living.

“The June 23 video actually captured the maturing male crossing to Bukit Durian where the female and baby live.

“It may be degraded forests but they are very diverse and that’s very important,” Felicity stressed.

But Dr Felicity attributed everything about the rapid success of the bridge to collaboration – working closely together between the experience and expertise of conservation practitioners from Pongo Alliance partners with particularly the genuine interest, commitment and leadership throughout the ranks of Sawit Kinabalu.

Felicity's pleasant shock

She cited the day when she gave a presentation to Victor Ationg – Sawit Kinabalu's Head of Plantation Business, to spend



Left: The mighty ficus tree to which the orangutan bridge is strapped.

Inset below: Amazing screenshot from a video camera trap which captures this male Orangutan crossing the Sg Pin bridge on June 23, 2020.

money on the project.

“I was very nervous and he just very quickly said, ‘OK wah’, and that was my big shock because I was telling him we may not see orangutans on this bridge. I said we are doing this in good faith, we don’t know, we may have no evidence.

“When we started this project we had no idea that we would find as many orangutans still living in the landscape. So I was very impressed,” she recalled the decisive day.

Philipa Mojilis – Manager of Sawit's Corporate Communication Unit, agreed it was about trust and faith.

“Actually we left the outcome to the experts so what the experts said we believed.” On hindsight, the results had validated Sawit's faith on Felicity and her associates in Hutan.

“Sawit's new thrust and direction did it. Manager

Philipa underscored the emerging direction of the company that led to this day.

“Others may not like it but we in Sawit Kinabalu we are in that sort of commitment being a Sabah Government wholly owned company,” she said.

“We are singing the same tunes now, it has to come from the direction of the management, the leadership, it has to be the leadership. We are committed, we try Pongo Alliance to be our partner in that manner, it’s good that the results are now showing which is a tremendous experi-

ence,” she said during the field trip to Sungei Pin on 4 September.

“We are honoured, we are proud. This is what Sawit Kinabalu is doing, we have made mistakes in the past, we are trying to correct them by getting Pongo Alliance to work with us.

“Way back 2003, we worked with WWF on reforestation of Sungei Pin because we didn’t know then we were not supposed to plant oil palm in that flood prone area,” she pointed out.

“Before that, we didn’t have this interest, now we have established Sungei Pin Conservation Area but not just Sungei Pin, we want to make every staff to have this realisation to become more environment friendly, care more about the environment and become friends of wildlife, I think slowly this will become the culture,” she said.

“I always remember what our MD (Masri Pudin) has said: No one wants to put aside thousands of hectares (total 8,661 hectares of which 2,632ha occupy Sungei Pin) which put in dollars would mean millions.”

Dr Felicity agrees: “This is a realisation that it doesn’t have to be one way or the other, that you can have a better environment that is beneficial to the people more.

“You are also creating jobs but also habitats that are not only good for wildlife but also for people as well, that awareness that you are part of the environment.”

Well, Philipa has said it: It’s getting Pongo Alliance to work with Sawit which has produced the quick results and uplifting experience.

Pongo Alliance is an alliance of some 15 partners comprising oil palm growers such as Sawit Kinabalu, businesses and conservation practitioners to promote human-orangutan co-existence landscape in Kinabatangan

A telling impact of impact of Pongo Alliance's skill sets

Dr Felicity, who is Pongo Alliance Kinabatangan Project Director, explains how its skill sets have produced results in the Sawit case.

“The idea of alliance is that word alliance that you bring in all the skill sets. Datuk Dr John Payne is the Executive Direc-

tor who has a long history from the 1970s and Hutan has been working in this landscape for 24 years and then we have the various oil palm companies, both national and Sabahan companies.

“So we are in this particular project the beneficiaries of all that work before. So it’s an accumulation of many people’s work to do this project here,” she said.

“For example, when we actually built the bridge together with our colleagues from Hutan, they are really experienced in putting up things high and doing the technical climbing.

“So it’s Pongo Alliance partner Hutan which works a lot here in collaboration with Sawit Kinabalu. And we have been training Sawit workers to ensure they follow the SOP and climbing to install camera traps,” she said.

“Team Hutan brought their experience in working continuously on improving bridges and making them so that they don’t kill the tress.

“They had become quite good at the type of places where we want to put bridges and so that’s a lot of expertise that I have been working to develop with Hutan over time but what worked out very quickly is Sawit Kinabalu was open to building the bridge.”

Working together is still the key

“So the real key is it’s the all the collaboration,” she repeated her belief.

“We had the experience as conservation practitioners restoring connectivity in our areas.

“We are always making the design better, such as the use of lighter materials which makes the bridge lighter and easier to put up and also it put less pressure on the tress so that we are not sacrificing the trees by the weight of the bridge,” she explained.

“Among the new innovations include experimenting with climbing knots which my retired engineer husband Ken came up with because he is a climber so he does have a big role.”

“When you are building a bridge, you always wonder whether the orangutans would use it the way you think.

“But, yes, it was how I hoped most for because he was putting his feet on the knots so he was going from knot to knot. I think that makes it so it doesn’t swing as much,” Dr Felicity concluded the success story.



Sawit Kinabalu senior staff with Dr Felicity and Philipa outside Sungei Pin Conservation Area Centre.



A cluster of orangutan nests near the Sg Pin bridge.