Gorillas, chimpanzees and African apes are some of the most common animals that cross a person's mind when they hear the words great ape. However, they tend to forget one of the most intelligent species of the great ape family: orangutans. Orangutans are brilliant creatures that can not only express the same emotions as humans, but they are smart enough to craft tools to use to their advantage (Gao). One example of their great intelligence, in particular, is from a crafty escape artist named Fu Manchu. He was an orangutan that lived in the Ohman zoo in the 1960s. The zookeepers would constantly find him outside of his cage, hanging out with his other orangutan friends. After repeatedly having to transport Fu Manchu back into his cage, the zookeepers finally decided to keep him under surveillance and figure out how he escaped. After careful examination, they discovered that Fu Manchu had been picking the lock on his cage with a metal wire he hid under his cheek pouch, confirming that orangutans are extremely intelligent creatures.

Besides having a sharp brain, orangutans are amazing physically as well. Most males stand at 4 ½ feet and weight 200-250 pounds while females stand at 3 ½ feet and weigh around 100-150 pounds. Orangutans also have one of the closest mother-child relationships of the earth's species. Orangutans mothers only give birth to one child at a time once every 6 or 7 years, about 4 or 5 times(https://redapes.org/about-orangutans/). The mother nourishes the males until they reach puberty, while the females stay longer to learn the child-rearing methods. However, because a mother is only able to give birth to a child every 6 to 7 years, the population of orangutans cannot quickly recover from the decline of their populations due to humans.
For many years, two types of orangutans have been identified: The Bornean and Sumatran. Both have shaggy reddish fur and are similar in many ways, including the fact that both experienced extreme population declines. About a century ago, there were probably more than 230,000 orangutans in total. However, the Bornean orangutan population is now estimated at about 104,700 and is classified as Endangered, and the Sumatran population is about 7,500, and is classified as Critically Endangered (Jayasinghe). However, even though these orangutan populations have been declining at a rapid pace, it doesn't compare to the decline of the newly discovered orangutan: the Tapanuli orangutan.

The Tapanuli orangutan is a newly discovered orangutan type, discovered in 1997. They have been isolated in North Sumatra for 10,000-20,000 years and are genetically similar to the other two types of orangutans. Although people have celebrated the new orangutan's discovery, their happiness in discovering the new species might not last if humans keep encroaching onto their territory.

Many humans believe that they have little to contribute to the decline in the orangutan population. However, little do they know that by simply completing their daily routine, they are harming the orangutan population. One way people contribute to the decline in animal population is by buying everyday products such as shampoos, instant noodles, and ice cream. Those artificial products all contain a harmful ingredient: palm oil. Palm oil is an extremely efficient product that can produce more oil per land than other oil products like coconut or soybean, so it tends to be preferred by companies. Because of the increase in demand for palm oil, many people have begun to clear rainforest land to make room for palm oil, destroying the
homes of orangutans. With the reduction of trees, the amount of carbon dioxide will increase, causing a massive climate change and orangutans not to be able to survive in harsh environments. Over 3.5 million hectares of rainforest have been destroyed to produce palm oil in the last two decades, contributing to the loss of over 80% of orangutan's land (Kenah).

Other factors like illegal hunting and poaching also take the lives of many orangutans. Much of the killing of orangutans are either caused by villagers who are threatened or want to eat orangutans. Farmers also contribute to a declining population when they kill orangutans out of fear of destroying their farm (Coghlan). Others are captured and slaughtered for their beautiful red fur and firm skin for the illegal wildlife trade. It has been shown that over 1,000 orangutans are illegally traded in the illegal wildlife trade. Some are also sold to breeding companies or to private/public zoos. Many of the orangutans are subject to harm and abuse because their owners force them to perform in front of large crowds (Skoglund). However, even the lucky ones that are not captured, killed, or sold are still in danger of a declining population. It's estimated that over 6,000 orangutans die per year, and by 2050, more than 45,000 orangutans will be lost (Juniper).

Another alarming factor, specifically to the 800 population of Tapanuli orangutan, is construction of the hydroelectric dam. Chinese companies, under China's belt and road, plan to construct a $1.6 billion hydroelectric power plant and dam in the middle of Sumatra, Indonesia. The companies already started to clear the forest for the project. However, if they keep clearing land, the recently discovered Tapanuli orangutans will become permanently extinct if the project is to go through. The dam is being built in the orangutan's most critical habitats, with the highest
population density being around 500 of the 800 Tapanuli orangutans. Despite many protests, the Chinese company is still in favor of building the dam, threatening the extinction of the Tapanuli orangutan (Leahy).

Lastly, one of the most significant and unnoticed problems that led to the decline of the orangutan population is its dependence on humans. Orangutans have been adapting to humans for the past 70,000 years. They have modified much of their survival tactics to survive. However, recently, orangutans have grown more and more dependent on humans due to the food tourists feed them. The orangutans have been trained to wait for human food from tourists causing them to lose the will to go hunt. This is extremely detrimental to orangutans because if the human tourists stop showing up to their homes with the juicy fruit and the processed goods, they snatch from their fellow humans, it is possible that many of the orangutans could die due to the inability to hunt or gather food. This shows that the dependence on humans is extremely toxic to orangutans, and it plays a significant role in the decline of the orangutan population.

Before writing this essay, I was not too fond of orangutans. When I was younger, I was one of the few Asians in a mostly white elementary school and was a bit overweight compared to my classmates. This caused my peers to mock me by calling me an orangutan and made me passionately dislike orangutans. However, when I was researching facts about orangutans, I realized how intelligent and interesting orangutans are. I realized that being called an orangutan isn't an insult: it's a compliment. My hatred for orangutans suddenly blossomed into a passion for not only protecting orangutans but also saving them as well. Writing this essay has shown me how many factors there are that threaten and harm the orangutan species.
However, writing this essay isn't enough; it's not going to change how I can personally impact the rainforest and the environment. After writing this essay and discovering the dangers that humans cause orangutans, I have cut down on the foods and products that contain unsustainable palm oil like processed snacks, lipsticks, and peanut butter. I eliminated all the unstoppable palm oil products and have replaced them with the more expensive certified sustainable palm oil products that do come from companies that do not clear forests for their crops. I have also made it a habit to pick up trash everywhere I go. Whether it's on bike rides or strolls to the park, I always keep a trash bag and a pair of reusable gloves in handy whenever I go out. I've also convinced my computer science class that I voluntarily teach, to spread the word about eliminating palm oil products and have collaborated with some of my fellow teenage teachers/tutors to spread the word as well. Lastly, I have also created an Instagram account called @savEorangutanstogether, dedicated to informing people about the hardships and struggles of these magnificent, beautiful red-furred creatures as well as other land animal creatures. I plan to spread awareness to orangutans and help other endangered land animals such as pandas, rhinos, and gorillas. Although these actions are not extremely difficult or challenging to do, they still make a huge environmental impact that may one day help save the declining populations of not only orangutans but other endangered land species.
Saving the Intelligent Red-fur Beasts: One Step at a Time

Works cited


“About Orangutans.” About Orangutans - Orangutan Outreach, redapes.org/about-orangutans/.
