



# ORANGUTAN GANG NEWSLETTER



Educating Others

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Every one of us can contribute to saving the rainforest every day, whether it's choosing one product over another at the grocery store, donating a few dollars to rehabilitation efforts, sending an email to an irresponsible company, or explaining to a friend why you can't, in fact, pick up a certain brand of cookies. You can also contribute by educating your community. The more people you inform about orangutans and palm oil, the more will be able to educate others, pressure companies, and fight for the rainforest. And you yourself will become an activist through your efforts.

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## CONSERVATION EDUCATION

One of the most important ways that you can contribute to saving the rainforest is simple: use your voice. The more people you educate and the more information you share about palm oil, the more all of us can work with each other to help protect orangutans and the other endangered species that share their rainforest home. And one of the most effective ways to share information about palm oil is through schools.

So whether you're a teacher, student, parent, or simply a concerned citizen, invite your local schools and environmental education programs to expand their students' and their community's knowledge about palm oil and conservation with [the Orangutan Gang's new lesson plan](#). Designed for the new world of online learning, the lesson plan allows teachers to mix and match four activities including fillable virtual worksheets, conservation project design, video discussions, and online research for students of all educational levels. You can access the lesson plan as well as accompanying videos and worksheets [on the Orangutan Gang website](#).

## NEW ETSY SHOP!

### ORANGUTAN GANG ETSY SHOP

The Orangutan Gang has an Etsy shop! Visit us at [www.etsy.com/shop/OrangutanGang](http://www.etsy.com/shop/OrangutanGang) to buy reusable, informational grocery bags and mini orangutan sewing kits. All proceeds will be donated to Orangutan Foundation International to contribute to rehabilitation for orphaned orangutans in Indonesia.



## MICHELLE DESILETS INTERVIEW

Michelle Desilets is the Executive Director of [Orangutan Land Trust](#), a nonprofit focused on supporting orangutan conservation by protecting rainforest habitat. Here, Michelle is interviewed by Pangaea Finn, Orangutan Gang founder and director.

**PF:** How did you get involved with Orangutan Land Trust?

**MD:** In 1994, I went to Borneo to volunteer with the care of orphaned, infant orangutans, and my heart was stolen by one little fellow called Somalia. I was a primary school teacher at the time, and every break I had, I went back to look after the orangutans. There I met Lone Droscher-Nielsen, who was also volunteering. We became friends with a shared passion for saving orangutans, and we thought we could do a better job of it than the organization with whom we were volunteering. So, we set up a charity in the USA, I went in search of funding, and Lone designed the new rescue center we dreamed of opening. In 1998, the money was found and the new center, Nyaru Menteng, was created, under a memorandum of understanding between the Borneo Orangutan Survival (BOS) Foundation and the Indonesian government. I then moved to the UK where I set up BOS UK to raise funds for the project.

We set up the project to care for up to 100 rescued orangutans. In the early days, most of the orangutans were rescued as pets or from the illegal trade in wildlife, but by 2004, the expansion of oil palm in the region in which the project existed (Central Kalimantan) began to take a serious toll. Orangutans, their habitat decimated by the clearing of forest to plant oil palm, were left starving, and were often victims of human-wildlife conflict in the plantations or in nearby villages. Eventually, Nyaru Menteng was bursting at the seams with over 800 orangutans, most of them victims of the palm oil boom. It was clear that the rescue centers could not save every orangutan facing this crisis, so Lone tasked me with looking at the palm oil industry to find ways to stop the destruction of habitat and the displacement of orangutans.

I created Orangutan Land Trust with Lone to enable sustainable solutions for the long-term survival of orangutans in the wild. The emphasis is on protecting orangutans by protecting their habitat, and given that thousands of orangutans live in habitat fragmented by oil palm where the threat is greatest, our solutions focus in this area.

ORANGUTAN  
LAND TRUST



All articles by Pangaea Finn  
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[www.orangutangang.org](http://www.orangutangang.org)

**PF: What are some of the ways that you and Orangutan Land Trust educate others about orangutans and palm oil?**

**MD:** First of all, we are very active in various platforms that work to transform the palm oil industry, such as the [Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil](#), the [Palm Oil Innovation Group](#), [PONGO \(Palm Oil and NGO\) Alliance](#), and the [Sustainable Palm Oil Choice](#). Engagement in these platforms allows us to educate retailers and manufacturers in the palm oil supply chain as well as decision-makers in government. Communicating the activities and objectives of these platforms to consumers also helps to educate them and build trust in sustainable palm oil. The presence of so many leading and reputable NGOs in these platforms is critical in not only ensuring the platforms are robust and effective and not mere greenwash, but in encouraging stakeholders, including consumers, that choosing sustainable palm oil is the right thing to do. We've also worked with zoos and other institutions around the world to get them educated on the issue over the years, and the result is that they then can educate their hundreds of millions of visitors around the world.

We are currently working to rebuild our website in order to present the information on this issue better to the public, and it will feature educational materials as well. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we also took the time to present at schools and universities and in conferences around the world on the issue. Now we are focusing more on webinars and social media to get the word out.

**PF: What is some of the outreach work that Orangutan Land Trust does to protect orangutans and their habitat?**

**MD:** Orangutan Land Trust does not have its own projects or staff on the ground in Asia, but instead supports the excellent work of established projects in that region. We help to fund all sorts of activities to protect orangutans and their habitat, including fire-fighting and prevention, forest restoration, community education, legal support to fight crimes against forests and wildlife, peat restoration, and conservation research.

**PF: What, in your experience, are some of the most effective ways to raise awareness about orangutans and palm oil?**

**MD:** I think it is essential to start with people's understanding. Many people may not even know what palm oil is, let alone the impact it has on orangutans and forests. Others have heard that palm oil is bad for orangutans and forest and have a little information why. In all cases, it is important to be honest about the catastrophic impact that the palm oil industry has had and continues to have on wildlife, but then be quick to say, "but there IS a solution." Also, a gut reaction to the news that palm oil can hurt orangutans is to decide to have nothing to do with palm oil. While this is an understandable and perhaps even laudable reaction, it does nothing to change what is happening on the ground. And this is where the communication of science and expert opinion plays such an important part. Research has demonstrated that a boycott of palm oil is not a solution; it either means shifting the problem somewhere else or making it worse in the regions where oil palm is grown. Conservationists working on the front line agree that in order to incentivize growers to produce their crops sustainably, consumers must demand sustainable palm oil, not turn away from it. Certainly, if a product contains unsustainable palm oil, it makes sense to avoid it, but it is even more important for the consumer to make clear to brands and retailers that they do not expect the products they buy to contribute to deforestation, biodiversity loss and exploitation.



**PF: In the face of such a big problem, how do you stay motivated?**

**MD:** I am so fortunate to have had the experience of knowing hundreds of orangutans personally, to develop strong bonds with them. Many of those orangutans are alive and well today because of the dedication of people who refuse to give up, even in the direst of circumstances. And indeed, the orangutans themselves have shown such resiliency in the face of adversity. The orangutans I have known and the people behind their survival give me the motivation to keep going.

**PF: What was your first experience with an orangutan like?**

**MD:** My first experience with an orangutan in Borneo was meeting Somalia. Somalia was an orphan, about 2 years old, and he lived in a rickety cage behind a ranger's hut in Tanjung Puting National Park. Somalia was skin and bones, hunched over, hugging his knees, and peering up at me through the darkness. He broke my heart and I just wanted to help him so much that I would cry myself to sleep at night thinking about him. Fortunately, Somalia was removed from this situation, and I was one of a series of volunteers to look after him for several months of recuperation. I slept on a small cot with Somalia and 3 other orphaned orangutans, taking them out to the forest to play every day for a month, and every day, Somalia improved. He got fatter and happier and stronger and often to my dismay, a lot naughtier. I'm informed that Somalia today is roaming free through the forest, a mighty cheek-padded bruiser of an orangutan.

**PF: What are a couple palm oil free products that you love?**

**MD:** I don't specifically look out for palm oil free products. If a product uses an oil, I am more concerned about whether that oil has been sourced sustainably, whatever kind of oil it is. Of the products in my home using sustainable palm oil, I love soaps from the [Little Soap Company](#) and candles from [Goodlight Natural Candles](#). For food products using sustainable palm oil, I love [Ferrero Rocher](#) chocolates and [Nairn's](#) oatcakes.

**PF: What is the largest threat to orangutans over the next ten years, and how can we mitigate the impact?**

**MD:** The main threats to orangutans can be summed up as two-fold: one is habitat loss (not only from unsustainable palm oil but from other activities such as logging, plantations for pulp and paper, dams, mining, road-building, etc.) and second is direct hunting or killing of orangutans (not just that associated with human-wildlife conflict as a result of habitat loss.) We can all contribute to mitigating the first threat, by choosing sustainable products such as FSC-certified wood and paper products and RSPO-certified palm oil. The second is not so well addressed by the conservation community, who are only now beginning to realize how big a problem it really is. More funding is needed by researchers and conservationists to accurately measure the problem, find out precisely where it is happening, develop the strategies to address the issue and take action. If Orangutan Land Trust were able to secure more funding, we'd look to support these efforts more robustly.

*Are you an activist who works to help save orangutans and the rainforest? Contact us at [orangutangang.org@gmail.com](mailto:orangutangang.org@gmail.com) and we could interview you for this newsletter!*

*To learn more, view merchandise, sign petitions, and take the palm oil free pledge, please visit our website at [www.orangutangang.org](http://www.orangutangang.org).*

