

## Orangutan SSP Spotlight

**Name:** Meredith L. Bastian, PhD



**SSP Job Title:** Research Advisor

**Brief info about yourself:** I recently started a new career in scientific publishing with the National Academy of Sciences, but I remain highly engaged and actively involved in orangutan conservation and in overseeing research with orangutans through my positions as the Orangutan SSP and SAFE Research Advisor and as a board member of the Orangutan Conservancy.

**Your job title (not SSP, but the zoo you currently work at):**

Recruiting Editor at *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in Washington, DC.

**Your history with orangutans:** I

conducted over 7 years of field research with wild Bornean orangutans in Central and Western Kalimantan while working towards my PhD focused on orangutan cultural behavior and through my position as the Orangutan Field Project Manager at Gunung Palung National Park while a Postdoctoral Research Associate. I then worked with Sumatran orangutans at the Philadelphia Zoo for 4 years and with Bornean and hybrid orangutans at Smithsonian's National Zoo for 7 years in my positions at both zoos as the Curator of Primates. I also served as an active elected member of the Orangutan SSP and Ape TAG steering committees for 9 years. Currently, I serve as the Orangutan SSP and SAFE Research Advisor and board member of the Orangutan Conservancy.



NATIONAL ACADEMY  
OF SCIENCES

**What did you study in school, internships, volunteering, etc. that helped you get to where you are today?** I double majored in Anthropology and Psychology at Bryn Mawr College and wrote my Anthropology honors thesis on research I conducted with juvenile rhesus macaques while a NIH Research Fellow. Throughout my studies I took advantage of several volunteer opportunities, serving as an archaeology field and laboratory assistant, a Psychology research assistant, a museum volunteer in a skeletal casting program, a tree shrew nursery laboratory technician, and as a wild gibbon research assistant in Thailand. My PhD is in Biological Anthropology & Anatomy from Duke University.

**Why orangutans?** I knew I wanted to work with non-human great apes since Elementary School, though as a child I always thought I would work with mountain gorillas. After having first worked with white-handed gibbons in Thailand, once the opportunity presented itself to work with wild orangutans in Indonesia I took it, knowing it would give me a chance to learn more about their innovative behaviors and cultural traditions. Once getting to know orangutans, I can't imagine preferring to work with any other taxa more.

**Best experience with orangutans:** Finding the very first male orangutan at the first wild orangutan field site I worked and follow him in the forest for many years. There was also an adult female with her then-dependent daughter with the male. It was extremely rewarding to be able to follow this same adult female and her new offspring when I returned to the site for the first time in over a decade and know that the big male I named after my cat, while no longer in his prime, is still often seen and followed.



**Worst experience with orangutans:** One day when I had followed a big male from about 4 in the morning until early afternoon, I was eager to eat my lunch once the male I was following had reached a food patch where I knew he would stay for a while. About 2 seconds after opening the Tupperware container, I suddenly had orangutan feces covering my rice. On a positive note, although my lunch was ruined, I was able to obtain a much-needed fecal sample.

**Biggest career accomplishment involving orangutans:** Successfully defending my PhD after years of very satisfying fieldwork with wild orangutans.

**The most unique form of orangutan memorabilia you own:** Definitely a tie between a tattoo of the Orangutan SSP logo on my arm and a giant piece of cardboard orangutan art by Michael Bartalos that I won at my first SSP silent auction.

