

Introducing Sumatra's New Great Ape Species

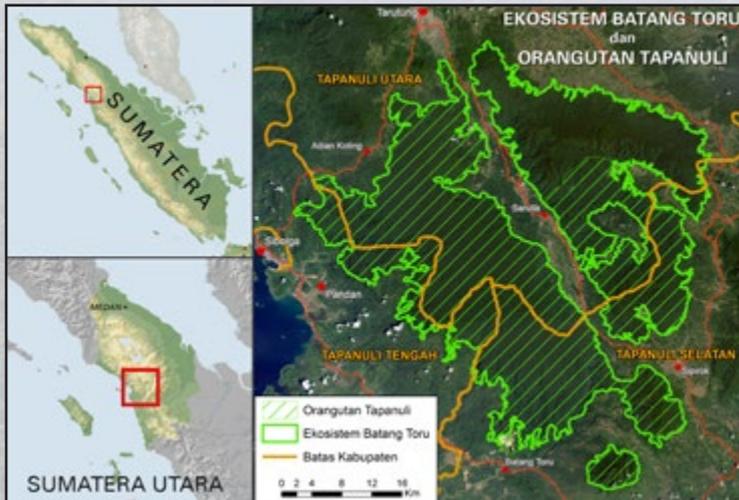
THE TAPANULI ORANGUTAN / *Pongo tapanuliensis*

The 'Tapanuli orangutan', with the Latin name '*Pongo tapanuliensis*', has just been declared the latest Great Ape species in the world. This new species is found only in the Batang Toru Ecosystem, consisting of rugged highland forests straddling the three Tapanuli districts, North Sumatra, Indonesia.

The Tapanuli orangutan was until recently regarded as the southernmost population of the Sumatran orangutan, *Pongo abelii*. However, based on detailed genetic, morphological, ecological, and behavioural research by Indonesian and foreign researchers, it has been discovered that the Tapanuli orangutan is taxonomically more closely related to the Bornean orangutan species, *Pongo pygmaeus*, and is in fact a separate species from both. Research also ancestral the Tapanuli orangutan is ancestral to all modern orangutan species.



An adult male Tapanuli Orangutan © Tim Laman



Short facts about *Pongo tapanuliensis* and their habitat:

- Less than 800 individuals remain in the wild;
- They are only found in the Batang Toru Ecosystem, in the three Tapanuli Districts of North Sumatra;
- The Batang Toru Ecosystem comprises about 150,000 hectares, and just 110,000 (1,100 km²) of this is current orangutan habitat;
- Approximately 85% of the Batang Toru Ecosystem is listed as 'Protected Forest', with the remaining 15% of primary forest designated as 'Other Use Area' or 'Production Forest';
- Most of the Orangutan's habitat is above 850 m asl.

- The Tapanuli orangutans are split into 2 main blocks (east and west) by the Sumatran fault line, with a third, smaller population in the Sibualbuali Nature Reserve, located adjacent to the west block;
- Re-establishing connectivity between these three separated populations is key to the survival of the species by avoiding inbreeding;
- Tapanuli orangutans breed very slowly, with females having their first offspring at around 15 years of age, and the interbirth interval being approximately 8-9 years. Orangutans can live for about 50-60 years;
- The new species designation is based on research in genetics, morphology, and behaviour;
- This new species is now the rarest and most threatened species of Great Ape in the world (even more than the mountain gorillas of Africa);
- The Tapanuli orangutan will be included in the IUCN Red List as 'Critically Endangered'.



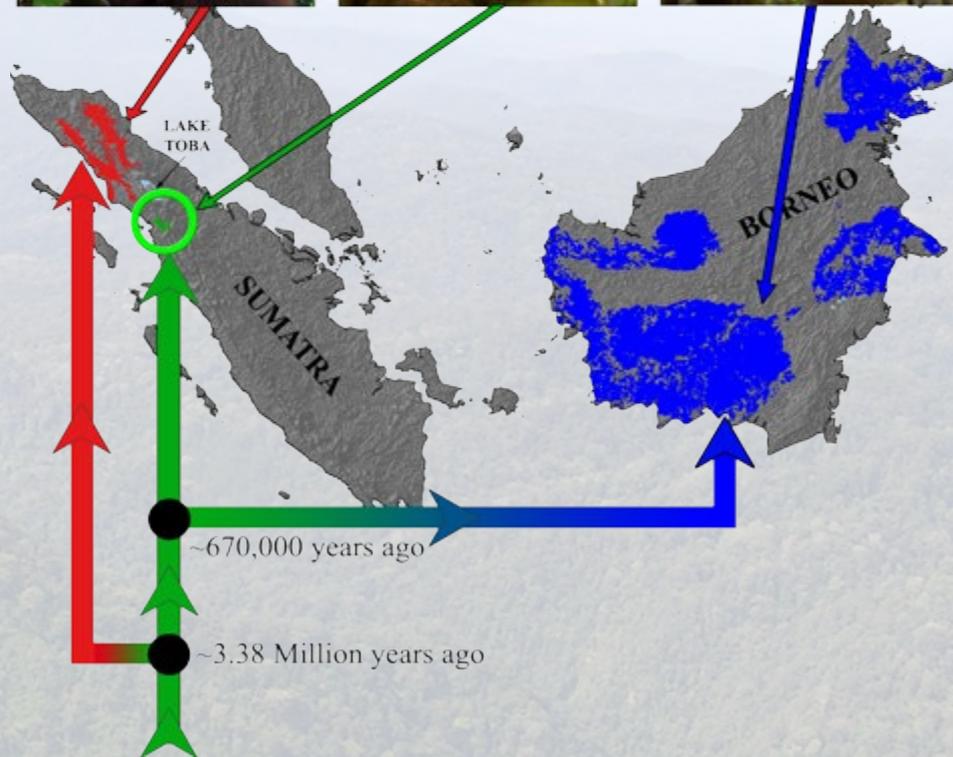
A young female Tapanuli Orangutan © Maxime Aliaga

Why is the Tapanuli orangutan a new species?

Genetic differences provided the first evidence for the Tapanuli orangutan species. Research indicates that there was a genetic separation from the Sumatran orangutan about 3.38 million years ago, whereas the Tapanuli orangutans split from the Bornean orangutans approximately 670 thousand years ago.

There are also a number of morphological and behavioural differences seen in the Tapanuli orangutans:

- The skull and jaw bones of the Tapanuli orangutan are more delicate than those of the Sumatran and Bornean orangutans;
- The fur is thicker and frizzier;
- The male Tapanuli orangutan has a moustache and prominent beard with flat cheek pads, covered in fine blonde hair;
- They have smaller molars than fossil orangutans (from the Pleistocene period);
- The Tapanuli orangutan long call differs from that heard in the other two species;
- They eat plant species that have not been recorded as consumed by the other orangutan species, including aturmangan (Casuarinaceae) seeds, sampinur (Podocarpaceae) fruits and flowers, and agathis (Araucariaceae) fruits.



The 'Tapanuli Orangutan' great ape is described in the following scientific article:

Nater, A., M.P. Greminger, A. Nurcahyo, M.G. Nowak, M. de Manuel Montero, T. Desai, C.P. Groves, M. Pybus, T.B. Sonay, C. Roos, A.R. Lameira, S.A. Wich, J. Askew, M. Davila-Ross, G.M. Fredriksson, G. de Valles, F. Casals, J. Prado-Martinez, B. Goossens, E.J. Verschoor, K. S. Warren, I. Singleton, D. A. Marques, J. Pamungkas, D. Perwitasari-Farajallah, P. Rianti, A. Tuuga, I.G. Gut, M. Gut, P. Orozco-terWengel, C.P. van Schaik, J. Bertranpetit, M. Anisimova, A. Scally, T. Marques-Bonet, E. Meijaard, and M. Krützen. 2017. Morphometric, behavioural, and genomic evidence for a new orang-utan species. *Current Biology*.



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