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Peer reviewed

THE COMPLETE RED APE

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Orang-Utans in Borneo by Gisela Kaplan and Lesley J. Rogers.
University of New England Press, 1994.

Orang-Utans in Borneo offers an unique and altogether engaging treatment of its topic. Indeed, authors Gisela Kaplan and Lesley Rogers seem to have created a new genre. The great breadth of scholarship of each author is complementary to that of the other. The result is an exceptionally rich context of geography, ecology, politics, economics, history, and culture within which the central themes unfold. Broadly taken, one theme is the precarious status of orang-utans worldwide, including the very real and immediate pressures forcing their situation. The authors emphasize the cognitive complexity and sociability of orang-utans which has often been underestimated in comparison with other great ape species. These capacities, as well as other behavioral and structural similarities between orang-utans and humans, raise the questions about primate phylogeny which constitute a second theme.

On yet another level, it is the story of two humans who first had a personal encounter with an orang-utan named Abbie and subsequently were deeply affected by many others. In the authors' words:

We cannot even begin to express our views on how we feel about this species other than to say that the orang-utan is a fascinating being. If we are able to convey anything of their subtlety, complexity and sensitivity that will lead one to feel a deep respect for their right to be, then the book will have done its most important work. (p.5)

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For this reader, the book was a complete success in developing an appreciation of the orang-utan as "a fascinating being".

The text begins by setting forth the human cultural context of ideas about orang-utans. In a world where human choices and behaviors are the principal factors that threaten the continued existence of species, how the orang-utan is regarded by humans is an essential concern. The authors present a well-documented overview of Western attitudes towards orang-utans and other great apes that effectively illustrates how human belief systems have historically conditioned human behaviors to the detriment of other species. Because the book revolves around the orang-utans of Borneo, specifically those at the Sepilok and Semengoh Rehabilitation Centres of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia, a wonderfully detailed account is given of the geography, demographics, politics, and economics of these regions. This account delineates the practical context within which the survival or extinction of the Bornean orang-utan will be determined. Finally, the context of attitudes of the indigenous populations of Sarawak and Sabah is reflected in local stories of the orang-utan.

The second chapter explores the rainforest habitat of the Bornean orang-utans. The reader is acquainted with the geography of the shrinking forests and orang-utan populations through an excellent series of maps. Similarly, consideration of local plant species is enhanced by marvelous color photographs. The general consideration of the flora and fauna of the Bornean rainforests is supplemented by a very useful discussion of the special problems that are presented to the researcher wishing to study rainforest species. Lastly, rehabilitation centres, national parks, and reserves as habitats for orang-utans are described with special attention to the Sepilok Rehabilitation Centre where much of the behavioral research of Kaplan and Rogers was conducted.

Chapters 3 and 4 are unified by the issue of the similarities among orang-utans, humans, and other great apes. Anatomical structures, genetics, and a variety of behaviors are considered. Appendix 2 (p.159) lists 27 morphologies shared between humans and orang-utans but only 9 among humans, chimpanzees, and gorillas. The authors argue that the DNA evidence is still open to debate. The question of human/orang-utan similarity is pursued with intriguing, in-depth considerations of posture and locomotion, feeding habits, and sexual and maternal behaviors.

The reader is introduced to the authors' study of population in Chapter 5 together with a thoughtful consideration of the effects of

environment and prior experience on the generalizability of the results of behavioral studies. Wild populations of orang-utans are difficult to study because of their solitary and arboreal habitat. Thus, most behavioral studies of this species have been done in zoos or other settings with variable prior human contact. The authors characterize their study group as "semi-wild", i.e., born in the wild, currently living free, but having had some transient contact with humans.

The authors' laterality studies are presented within the larger issue of similarities of brain structure and cognitive behaviors between humans and the great apes. In their study group of orang-utans, many behaviors were examined for evidence of lateral bias. Face touching with the left hand was the most strongly lateralized behavior identified, a directional bias shared with humans and perhaps other great apes. The authors interpret this as evidence of functional specialization of the cerebral hemispheres. Evidence of tool using, problem solving, communication, and sign language is reviewed to permit comparison of the cognitive abilities of orang-utans with those of other great apes. The authors conclude that the orang-utan has proved equally talented to other great apes, perhaps even more gifted.

The epilogue returns to the theme of endangerment and preservation. It is a concise but powerful statement about the current state of affairs worldwide that affect the survivability of the orang-utan with suggested solutions and a plea that time is running out for the wild populations of orang-utans.

This is a wonderful book. It was intended for a mixed audience of primatologists, zoo personnel, conservationists, and general readers. It does not miss the mark. This book is exceedingly readable and, at the same time, thoroughly informative about orang-utan structure, behavior, and habitat, as well as a variety of issues affecting orang-utans. It is furnished with glorious color photographs to illustrate relevant points, while also characterized by careful scholarship and appropriate use of references throughout.

One aspect of the book which this reviewer particularly enjoyed is the frank personal involvement and admitted caring of the authors. It is rare that scientists of this calibre admit to the passions that drive them in their studies. This work is all the more effective for their honesty. I can only hope the book finds its way to the libraries, laboratories, classrooms, offices, and homes around the world where it may have its intended effect.