

Malaysia Orang-utan trip report

5th February till 5th March 2015
Real gap - Malaka Zoo and Borneo

I spent the first two weeks of my trip in a zoo in Melaka, it was originally meant to be a zoo in Kuala Lumpur but the Association we were with, called Ape Malaysia, decided to change it to the zoo in Melaka and when we got there we could see why! I was amongst 3 other volunteers and the zoo was newly changed over from a privately owned zoo to being owned by the government. This change meant that a lot of the staff that were experienced in the areas there and had worked with the animals there, left. So the animals were left without any one caring for them! What then happened is that people were brought in from random jobs, such as working in factories, to come help look after these animals with no experience; nor any sort of training at all. This is why we were there, to try and help give these animals a better life and to help the keepers to understand what was needed.

The conditions of a lot of the enclosures and night-dens especially weren't acceptable living conditions for the animals; this was very distressing for us. Every morning we would be up before the zoo opened and would go and help clean the night-dens of the Orang-utans, Chimpanzee, Sun Bears and Mandrills; this involved hosing out the cages then scrubbing them with detergent. We would then prepare all the food for all the primates and then would go round feeding them, by throwing the fruit and bread onto their islands or putting it through their bars. We could go in with the Capuchin monkeys and we made a spinning ball so that we could put some food in there for them to try and thus give them a bit of enrichment, we also got to feed the lemur by hand every day, which I loved!

To find ways to help the animals and give the keepers ideas for future enrichment, we came up with a few designs and distributed the enrichments toys or objects throughout the two weeks. We did a few simple things such as we cut down some banana trees with machetes and chopped it into smaller pieces and made holes in it, which we stuffed with raisins. It may have been simple but the Chimpanzee loved it and kept her occupied for an hour or so.

On a bigger scale we spent the majority of the time building a platform for the Orang-utans. Their enclosure originally had a few swings and ropes hanging in it but still felt empty, so with help of the keepers, we put up a wooden platform based between three trees. We made its base of logs and then used fire hoses, which were donated by the local fire department, to help tie it together. (pic 1) We also used the fire hose to build a separate hammock in the Orang-utan enclosure. Another thing we did was to make toy boxes out of cardboard into fun shapes and then stuffed those with banana tree leaves, raisins and nuts. We made swinging balls made from fire hose for the Sun bears; their night-den was by far the worst I saw, so I wanted to give them something that would last a bit longer. We hung the ball up and covered it in honey and straight away they were interested. A simple thing that we did, that the keepers can easily do, is we went round throwing coconuts in enclosures, which kept most the animals busy trying to open them. The last thing we did was to make ice blocks which we had stuffed with fruit, leaves and cardboard.

After our two weeks at the zoo we were transported to a B and B in Sukau, which is a very small village in Borneo. It is a very different culture here compared to Melaka which is altogether a bigger place. Every lunch and supper we went to a local lady's house; we called her "Auntie" who also taught us how to cook some Malaysian meals. (pic 2) The whole community were very welcoming.

Each morning we got up at 5.45am and headed out on the boat as we were situated next to the Kitabatan river, this took us to our tree planting site, which is where most trees had been cut down for palm oil. The previous volunteer group had planted a few trees and they are gradually growing different stages of trees. We were there to help maintain these trees. A lot were struggling as the grass grows very quickly and many weren't visible or in bad condition. So with our machetes we would clear the grass around each tree to give it a chance to grow. (pic 3) We would do this till 10 o'clock when it would get too hot. In the afternoon we went on a boat ride observing and

monitoring all the animals and different species down the river, seeing the Orang-utans in the wild here is very different to seeing them how we saw them in the zoo. We also got to see many other animals especially the crocodiles of which the river had many! On our last day we were taken to Sepilok an Orang-utan rehabilitation centre, where it was great to see the different stages of rehabilitation, but was amazing to see them as babies; most of them were very thin. We spent a day at the local school, each of us given a task to talk about such as, things you find in the forest and how to help protect it. This was a way to help the young children understand the environment that was around them and how to help maintain it. (pic 4)

It was a really great experience and I learnt that you can make a huge difference with just a bit of hard work, especially when I was at the zoo working on enrichment.

Thank you very much for your financial support, I wouldn't have been able to do it otherwise.



Pic 1



Pic 2



Pic 3



Pic 4