

MIGHTY EARTH SATYA BUMI

CODE RED FOR THE TAPANULI ORANGUTAN:

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO SAVE THE WORLD'S MOST ENDANGERED GREAT APE?

October 2026

Cover photo by Matt Senior



Tapanuli Orangutan. Matt Senior.

Foreword by Amanda Hurowitz, Great Apes program lead at Mighty Earth:

Across the world, nature is in retreat. More than one million species are threatened with extinction as human activity destroys the ecosystems upon which life depends.

The warning signs are all around us. Yet few are as stark as the plight of the Tapanuli orangutan found only in the forests of Batang Toru in northern Sumatra, this extraordinary great ape was only recognised as a distinct species in 2017. Its evolutionary lineage stretches back millions of years but its future now hangs by a thread.

Already the rarest great ape on Earth, its forest home is under mounting pressures, while its small and isolated population leaves it exceptionally vulnerable to further losses. It also suffered further devastating losses following the floods and landslides that swept through its remaining habitat in November 2025.

This is Code Red for the Tapanuli orangutan, a species on the brink of extinction without a recovery plan. We cannot allow one of our closest living relatives in the animal kingdom to simply disappear on our watch.

The danger is immediate but extinction is not inevitable. There is still an opportunity to protect the remaining population, restore damaged forests and secure a future for this remarkable species. But the window to save them from disappearing is closing fast. Conservation takes time. Forests cannot be restored overnight and orangutans reproduce so slowly that a population depleted today may take generations to recover. This is why action cannot wait until the last few individuals remain.

A clear, coordinated recovery plan is urgently needed. Protecting the forest that remains, restoring damaged habitat and preventing further losses of orangutans must be treated as a critical priority. The international community also has a responsibility to act. As governments gather in Yerevan, Armenia, for the United Nations biodiversity summit CBD COP17, they will face a profound test of their commitment to halting and reversing the destruction of nature. But ambitious promises are not enough. They must be matched by decisive action to protect the species and habitats most at risk.

The Tapanuli orangutan is a powerful reminder of what is at stake. Its fate will be determined not by the declarations made but by the decisions we take now. With so few Tapanuli orangutans left, every single one matters. The choice is ours. We can either stand by as this extraordinary species is pushed towards extinction, leaving future generations to know it only through photographs or we can act now to ensure it has a future. How tragic would it be for the most recent great ape to be discovered to be the first one to become extinct.

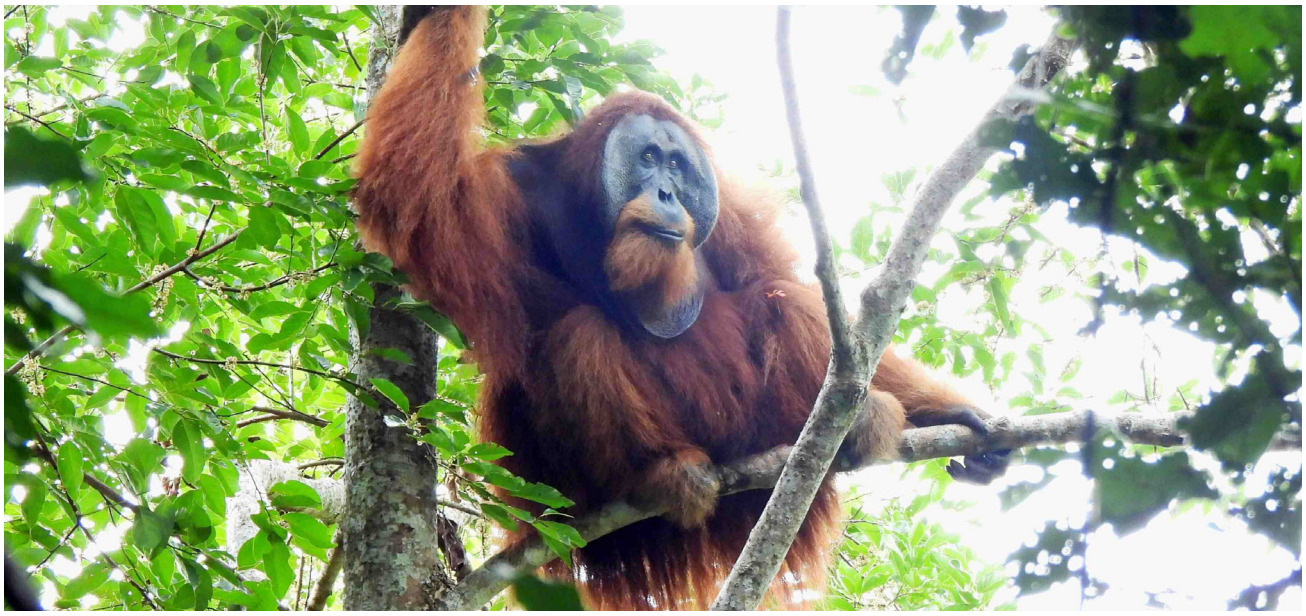
The time for promises has passed. The time to save the Tapanuli orangutan is now.



Introduction

They have roamed through the ancient tropical forests of Sumatra for more than three million years but scientists only officially declared an entirely new species of great ape less than a decade ago.

Until then, just two species of orangutan - the Bornean (Pongo pygmaeus) and the Sumatran (*Pongo abelii*) - were recognised.



Tapanuli Orangutan (Flanged Male) at Batang Toru research station. Yayasan Marsada Sahata Lestari.

In 2017, researchers confirmed that a small, isolated population living in the Batang Toru rainforest ecosystem of North Sumatra, first discovered by scientists in 1997, was genetically distinct. The Tapanuli orangutan (*Pongo tapanuliensis*) was officially described as a third species, "representing the most ancestral lineage of living orangutans."[1]

Hidden in plain sight, it was the first new great ape species to be described since the 1920s. But by the time scientists announced this extraordinary scientific breakthrough, the excitement was quickly overshadowed by a devastating discovery.

Fewer than 800 Tapanuli orangutans were thought to remain in the wild, making them the rarest and most endangered great ape on Earth. Classified as Critically Endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the species had already suffered a devastating decline: a 2021 study estimated that just 2.5% of its 1890 distribution remained - a staggering 97.5% loss in little more than a century. [2]

But if the fortunes of the Tanpanuli weren't bleak enough, the situation is now far graver.

Their entire home is the Batang Toru ecosystem, a pocket of northern Sumatra covering just 1,420 square kilometres – an area slightly smaller than Greater London.

This extraordinary landscape is also a vital habitat for many other rare and threatened species, including primates, the Sumatran tiger, pangolins, tapirs and sun bears who also require intact forests to survive. But for the Tapanuli orangutan, this single patch of forest is the only place on Earth it can call home.

In November 2025, Cyclone Senyar unleashed torrential rainfall across northern Sumatra, triggering catastrophic floods and 50,000 landslides that tore through the Batang Toru rainforest.



A general view shows the rainforest canopy in the Lubuk Raya Nature Reserve, part of the Batang Toru ecosystem, in South Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia, October 3, 2026. Mighty Earth / Garry Lotulung



A landslide scar cuts through the forest in the Batang Toru ecosystem, in Sipirok District. Mighty Earth.

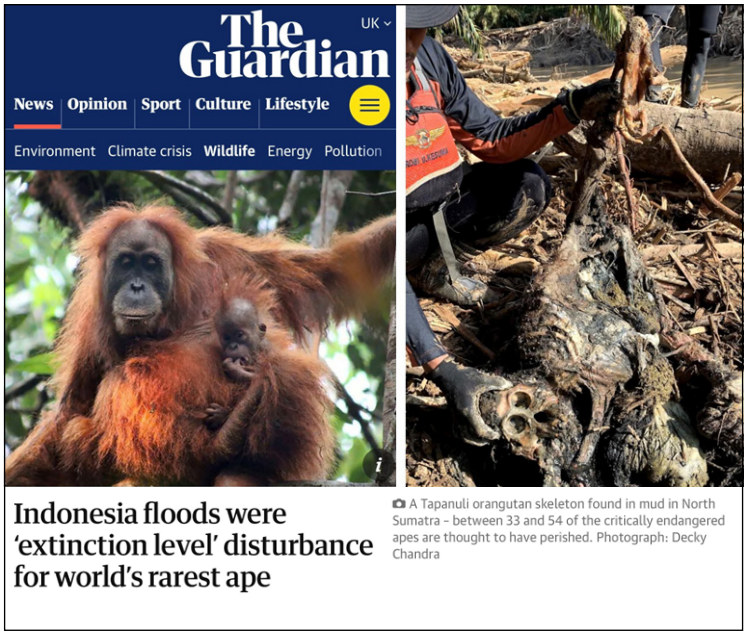
After more than 1,000mm (39in) of rain fell over four days, entire hillsides collapsed, sweeping away trees, vegetation and the forest canopy on which orangutans depend for food, shelter and survival.

A scientific study estimated that the disaster may have killed around 58 Tapanuli orangutans and damaged more than 8,300 hectares (20,500 acres) of intact forest in the western block of the ecosystem. This single event led to more forest lost in their range than between 2002-2023 combined.[3]

For a species already teetering on the edge, the losses are catastrophic. While scientists had previously put numbers around the 800 mark, a survey conducted before the devastating cyclone estimated that only 716 remained in Batang Toru. The other study, released after the disaster detailing that up to 58 were killed, takes the total up to an estimated 658. This equates to 11% of the west block population and 7% of the entire species. To put that loss into human terms it equates to 580 million people or almost four out of every five living in Europe.

The areas which have lost their canopy and topsoil are expected to lack suitable habitat or food for orangutans for 5 to 10 years, until forests and vegetation recover. [4]

Previously it was thought that if more than 1% of the species died it would put the Tapanuli orangutan on a path to extinction. **This single four-day event caused enough destruction to wipe out the equivalent of 10 years of normal decline.** Such a demographic shock threatens the very survival of the species.



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Indonesia floods were 'extinction level' disturbance for world's rarest ape

A Tapanuli orangutan skeleton found in mud in North Sumatra – between 33 and 54 of the critically endangered apes are thought to have perished. Photograph: Decky Chandra

The Guardian. December 12, 2025

While the climate crisis has supercharged the intensity of Cyclone Senyar by 28-160% according to analysis, a myriad of threats faced the Tapanuli orangutan population before this extreme weather event tore through Batang Toru.[5]

The huge Chinese-owned North Sumatra Hydro Energy's dam slices through its habitat precisely at the intersection of the three sub-populations of the Tapanuli orangutan - fragmenting the population. The Martabe Gold Mine, owned by UK Conglomerate Jardine Matheson has also expanded north into their habitat, while the species was already under siege from deforestation, agricultural expansion, mining and hunting.

Extreme weather events, including global warming, intense El Niño cycles, and ongoing human disturbances are changing Batang Toru's fire risk profile.



A landslide caused by the 2025 cyclone on a hillside surrounded by pristine rainforest, the only home of the world's rarest great ape.. Mighty Earth.

Any one of these threats could jeopardise the Tapanuli orangutan's survival. Striking in such quick succession, they have pushed a species already on the brink into a race against extinction.

Professor Serge Wich from Liverpool John Moores University, UK and one of the scientists involved in formally describing the Tapanuli orangutan as a distinct species in 2017, said allowing it to disappear would represent far more than the loss of one great ape.

"It would be a terrible failure by humanity, the conservation community and governments. With all the knowledge and money we have in the world, if we can't save charismatic species like this... what is the hope for all the other species that we care about?"

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With all the knowledge and money we have in the world, if we can't save charismatic species like this... what is the hope for all the other species that we care about?"

Professor Serge Wich

The warning could not be clearer. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has called for a moratorium on projects that could damage the Tapanuli orangutan's habitat until a conservation management plan is adopted.

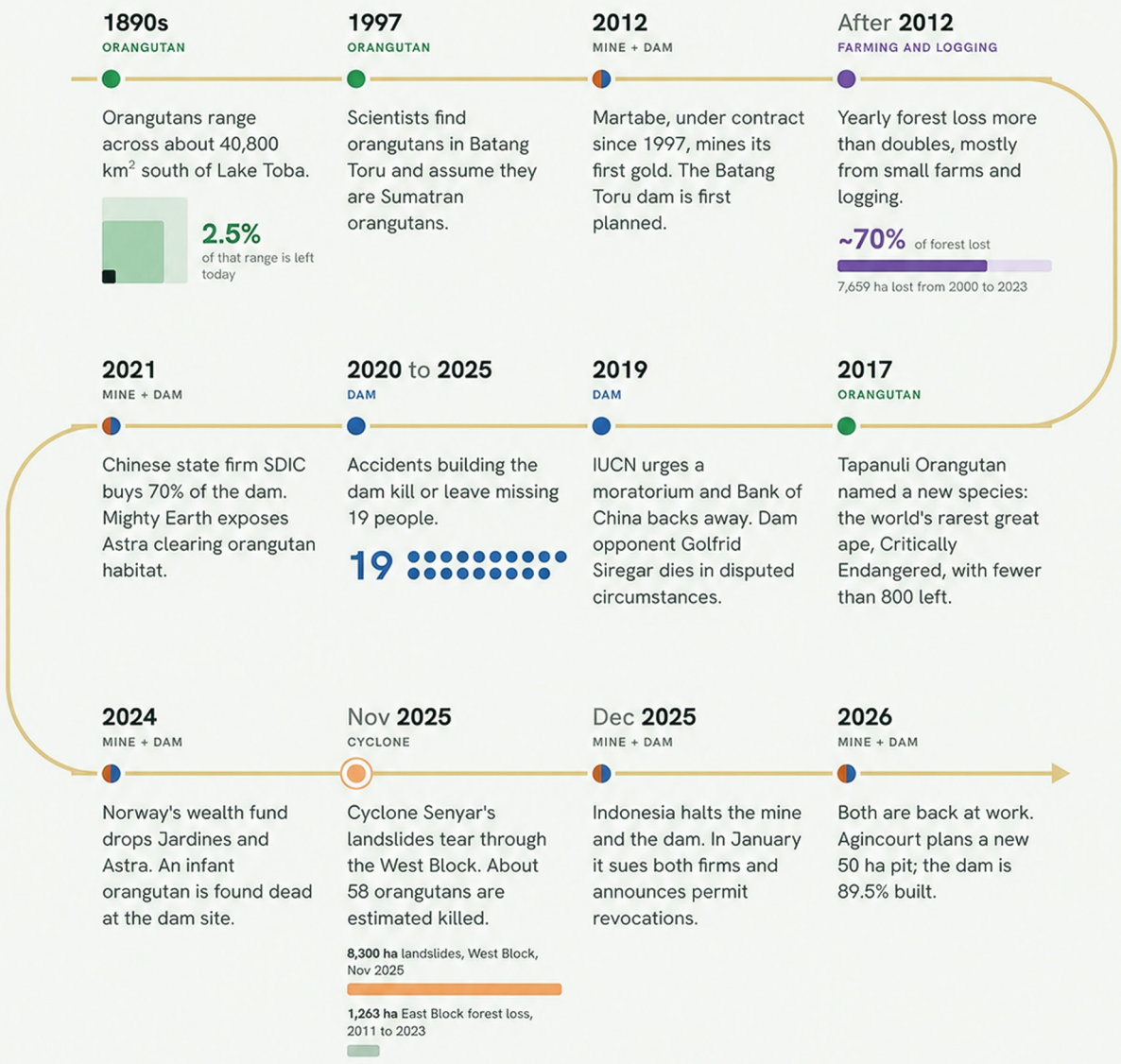
But stopping further destruction will not be enough. What remains of its forest home must be protected, damaged habitat restored and every preventable loss of an orangutan stopped.

The Tapanuli orangutan has already been pushed to the brink. Without immediate, coordinated action, the next chapter in its story could be extinction.

TAPANULI ORANGUTAN TIMELINE · 1890S TO 2026

A gold mine, a dam and the world's rarest great ape

MARTABE GOLD MINE · BATANG TORU DAM · FARMING AND LOGGING · ORANGUTAN · CYCLONE



Landslide area and deaths are model estimates. Sources: Meijaard et al. 2021, PLOS ONE; Nater et al. 2017, Current Biology; IUCN; AidData; BankTrack; Mongabay; NBIM; Sreekar et al. 2026, Biological Conservation; Meijaard et al. 2026, Current Biology; Hadi et al. 2026, Global Ecology and Conservation; Indonesia Ministry of Environment; Agincourt Resources; ESDM.

Graphic: Mighty Earth

Threats: A rainforest under siege



Agincourt is expanding its Martabe mine northwards towards the next hillside, Tor Ulu Ala (TUA). Mighty Earth.

Just months after the Tapanuli orangutan was officially recognised as a separate species, it was already fighting a new threat to its existence. Despite the headlines surrounding the discovery, Chinese state-owned company Sinohydro, backed by the Bank of China, pushed ahead with constructing an access road through rainforests in April 2018 for a $1.6 billion hydropower project, part of the Chinese-backed Belt and Road Initiative, in the heart of the Tapanuli orangutan's remaining habitat. This was despite warnings from conservationists that it posed an immediate threat to the species' survival including Erik Meijaard, the Managing Director of Borneo Futures who at the time warned that "the hydrodam will significantly increase the likelihood of extinction."[6]



The Batang Toru hydro project, including the dam head wall shown here, is nearing completion in South Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra. Mighty Earth.

It was due to be in operation in 2022 but has been pushed back to October 2026 due to pandemic-related delays and environmental opposition. In late 2021, the State Development Investment Corporation (SDIC) bought it outright. The hydropower project's physical footprint has been significant. By 2024, the Batang Toru hydropower project had cleared an estimated 535 hectares of rainforest, adding to the degradation of a landscape already vulnerable to floods and landslides.[7].

Access roads, tunnels, transmission lines and other infrastructure have also been carved further into the rainforest, creating additional barriers between already isolated populations and making the corridors needed to reconnect them harder to restore.

But stopping the hydropower project alone would not have secured the Tapanuli orangutan's future. Its rainforest home was already being eroded by agriculture, logging, mining and other development, while hunting and human-wildlife conflict placed further pressure on its dwindling numbers.

Between 2000 and 2023, around 7,659 hectares of rainforest – roughly five per cent – were lost across the Tapanuli orangutan's historical range. The annual rate of deforestation roughly doubled after 2012, a period that also saw the development of the Martabe gold mine, Batang Toru hydropower project and Sarulla geothermal project. Smallholder agriculture and small-scale logging remained the dominant drivers, accounting for around 70 per cent of rainforest loss after 2012.[8]



Martabe's existing gold mining pits in the foreground. Agrincourt plans to expand the mine's operations northwards towards called Tor Ula Ala (TuA), the hill in the background, (TUA). Mighty Earth.

Individually, each new road, farm or development may appear to take only a small bite out of the rainforest but together their impact is far more dangerous. "All these small bits add up," says Professor Serge Wich. For a species already on the brink, he argues, the direction needs to be reversed: instead of allowing its habitat to continue shrinking, the amount of rainforest available to the orangutans needs to grow to make the population more resilient.

The damage caused by clearing can also extend far beyond the land physically lost. New roads and other infrastructure open previously inaccessible rainforest to further encroachment, logging and hunting. As trees are cleared and Tapanuli orangutans lose access to their natural food sources, they may venture into cultivated land, bringing them into conflict with farmers.

Animals can be injured or killed, while infants may be taken from their mothers for the illegal pet trade. Hunting adds another pressure. For an animal that reproduces as slowly as an orangutan, even the loss of a small number of adults can have serious consequences for the survival of an already tiny population.

Instead of allowing its habitat to continue shrinking, the amount of rainforest available to the orangutans needs to grow to make the population more resilient.

On the western edge of the Tapanuli range sits the vast Martabe gold mine, operated by PT Agincourt Resources (PT AR), part of the global conglomerate Jardine Matheson. By January 2022, PT AR had expanded its operational footprint to approximately 509 hectares.

This increased to 555.9 hectares by October 2024, and further to 603.2 hectares by October 2025. Much of this expansion occurred in previously intact rainforest.[9]

Despite concerns over the Tapanuli orangutan's shrinking habitat, the Martabe gold mine is now proceeding with a northward expansion, developing a new pit at Tor Ulu Ala beyond the mine's existing footprint.[10]

Thousands of hectares of Orangutan wiped out overnight by Cyclone Senyar

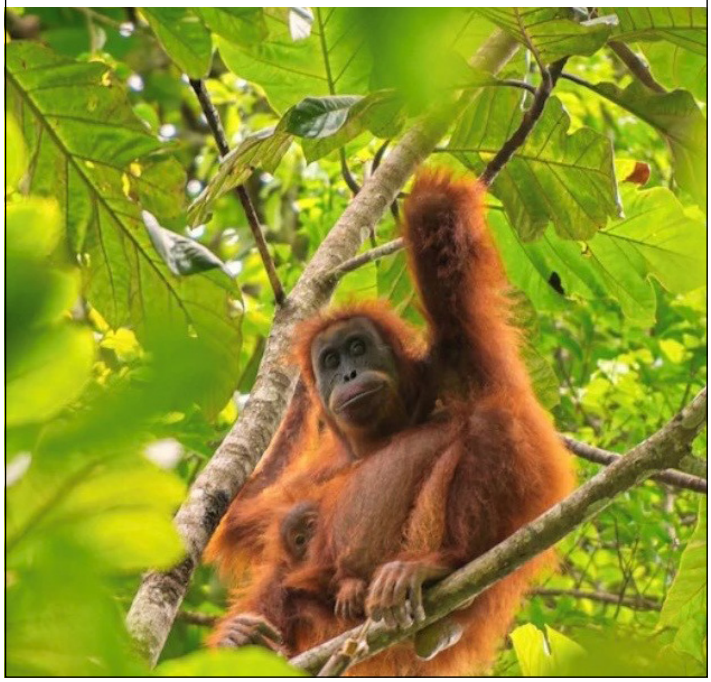


Drone view of aftermath of Cyclone Senyar that hit Sumatra in December, uprooting trees in flash flooding. December, 2025. Garry Lotulung.

The Telegraph

Cyclone turned forest into orangutan graveyard

With fewer than 800 critically endangered Tapanuli species left, loss of 58 is 'major blow'



The Telegraph, June 11, 2026.

Then, in November 2025, catastrophe struck. Extreme rainfall brought by Cyclone Senyar triggered widespread landslides and flooding across West Batang Toru, the species' largest remaining stronghold.

Satellite analysis mapped around 8,303 hectares of landslides and flood-scour scars, reducing rainforest cover within the West block by around 11.7 per cent. In a matter of days, the disaster caused more rainforest loss than had occurred across the Tapanuli orangutan's entire range during the previous 23 years. By overlaying the damaged areas with orangutan population-density data, researchers estimated that approximately 58 individuals may have been killed, although the uncertainty is substantial, with a modelled range of 18 to 120. The central estimate represents around 11% of the West Batang Toru population - a devastating blow to a species with so few individuals left.

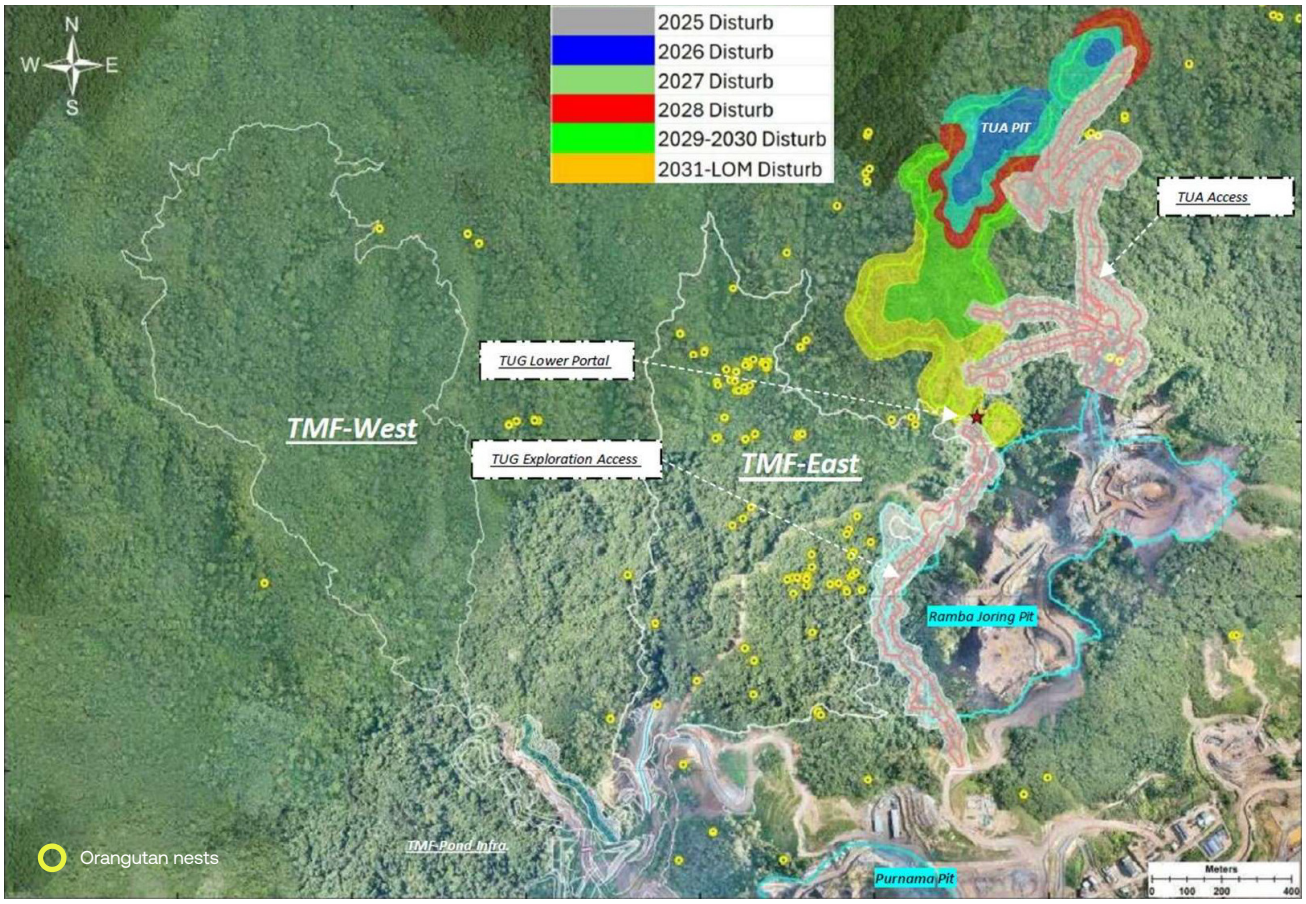
A subsequent investigation concluded that the most severe impacts occurred in the Batang Toru Landscape and that "the scale of destruction cannot be attributed solely to extreme weather."[11] The climate crisis raises the stakes further. A warmer atmosphere can hold more moisture, increasing the potential for extreme rainfall, although the extent to which climate change influenced this particular cyclone has not been fully established. The disaster exposed how quickly extreme weather can overwhelm a population with almost no capacity to absorb further losses.

Agincourt's Expansion Plans targeting $1 billion worth of gold

Despite the ongoing impacts and threats to the Batang Toru Landscape, the Martabe mine plans to blast multiple access roads to target deposits of gold and silver in a mountain area located in a conservation landscape designated as a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) - also classified as an Area of Zero Extinction (AZE).

The target area known as Tor Ulu Ala is considered to hold up to 1 million ounces of gold - worth roughly US$4 billion based on 'spot' prices on September 30, 2026.

In March 2025, the company started constructing one access road to TUA but then halted development in late 2025. Between May and June 2026, two major landslides took place in the path of the planned road.



Agincourt's map of Tor Ulu Ala (TUA) expansion plan for the Martabe mine and the close vicinity of orangutan nest sightings.
Map previously published by Mongabay.

According to an Agincourt map of orangutan nests surrounding the mine, at least 10 nests were located in the path of the landslides. The mine disputes claims that the June disturbance was a landslide, saying trees fell as material shifted following blasting but that the slope itself did not slide; it has acknowledged, however, that further slippage may occur as blasting proceeds at the proposed TUA pit because of the area's steep terrain.[12]

Every hectare counts

The threats are no longer arriving one at a time. Habitat destruction, fragmentation, hunting and extreme weather are converging on the same tiny population, each compounding the damage caused by the others.

With so few Tapanuli orangutans left, there is almost no margin for further loss.

Every hectare of rainforest destroyed, every connection severed and every individual killed pushes the Tapanuli orangutan closer to a point from which it may not recover.

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Challenges facing recovery

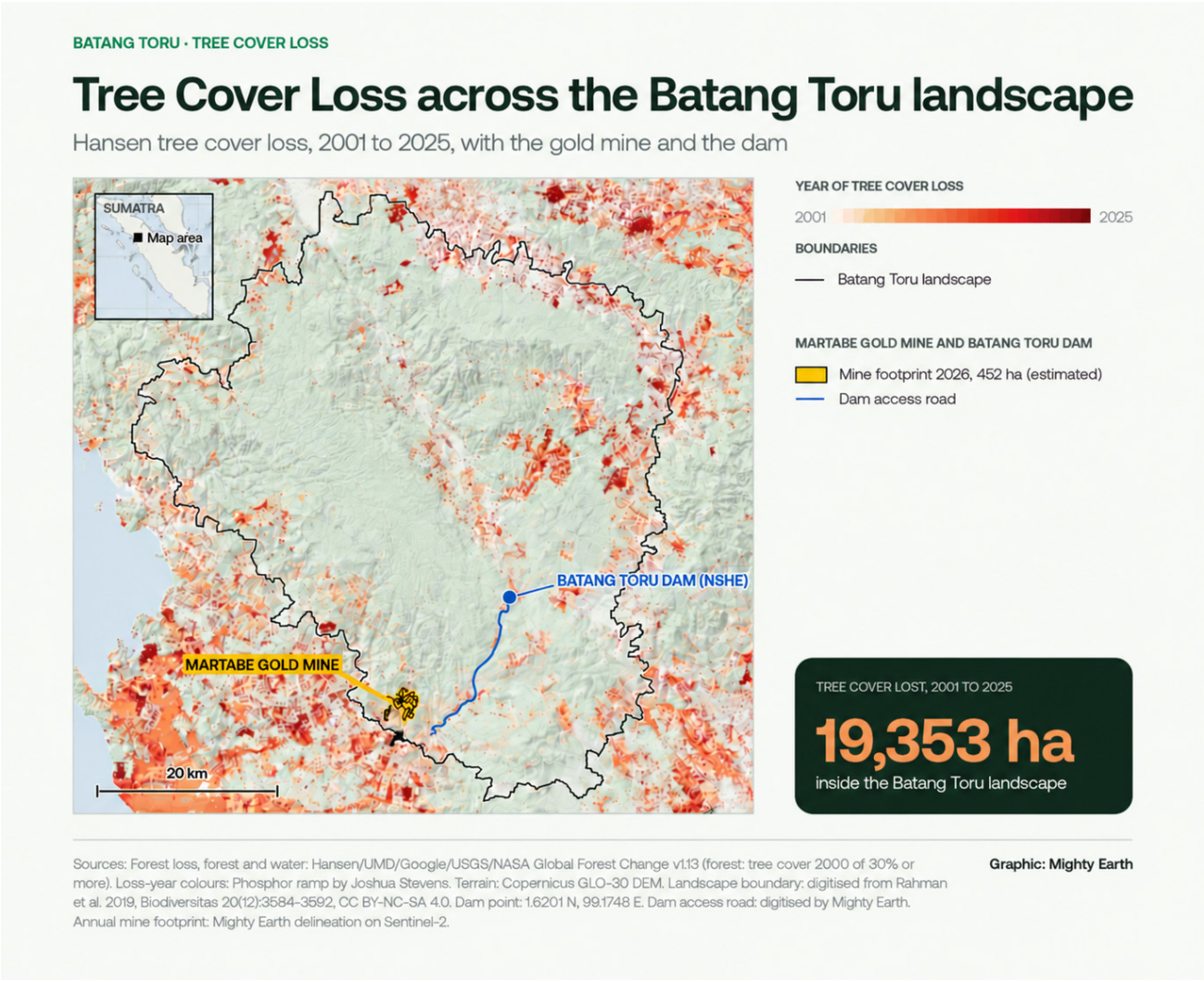
Even if every major threat to the Tapanuli orangutan disappeared tomorrow, bringing the species back from the brink is extraordinarily difficult due to a variety of challenges.

Its population is split between three increasingly isolated areas of the Batang Toru Ecosystem: West Batang Toru (514 individuals), East Batang Toru (159) and Sitandiang-Sibual-buali (43).[13] These figures come from surveys conducted between 2021 and 2023, before the devastating landslides of November 2025 - decimating numbers in the west block further.

The populations were also separated long before the Batang Toru hydropower project was proposed. Professor Erik Meijaard, Managing Director of Borneo Futures and one of the first experts to describe the species, said: "The East Block and the small Sibual-buali population were already separate before the project was proposed. Decades of forest loss did that: farmland, settlements and roads in the valleys. What the dam did do is create a barrier between the West Block and the Sibual-buali population. The reservoir, access roads, tunnel works and transmission lines cut through that area. That risks splitting the overall population into smaller units that can no longer mix. The project also sits where we'd most want forest corridors to reconnect the West Block with the Sibual-buali block."



Tapanuli orangutan, Mongabay.





Caption. The expansion of the Martabe gold mine has recently led to landslides in rainforest areas that were mapped by Agincourt as having orangutan nests. The landslides are due to ongoing mining and infrastructure development. Mighty Earth.

For a species with a population this small, isolation makes them particularly vulnerable, with Professor Serge Wich warning that the East Batang Toru group is now at risk of becoming further fragmented.

Small groups can also gradually lose genetic variation, further weakening their prospects of long-term survival. Erik Meijaard added: “Chance events hit small groups much harder: a few deaths, a skewed sex ratio, disease or a local fire. Isolated groups also lose genetic diversity and become more inbred over time. That reduces fitness and their ability to adapt.”

Fragmentation only increases other risks. “Animals get killed crossing open land, come into conflict with farmers and face more hunting where access improves,” he added.

The Tapanuli orangutan’s biology is also another challenge due to possessing one of the slowest reproductive rates of any mammal. Research across seven wild orangutan populations found an average interval of 7.6 years between surviving offspring, while females typically do not have their first baby until around the age of 15.

Their survival strategy instead depends on extraordinarily high survival rates. Female orangutans have been found to have a 94% probability of surviving to the age of first reproduction, while offspring survival is comparable to levels achieved by humans only in the 20th century. Their largely solitary, tree-dwelling lifestyle is thought to help keep mortality exceptionally low when not impacted by deforestation or hunting. But this survival strategy built on keeping almost every mother and infant alive can unravel when deaths suddenly rise. Erik Meijaard warns that modelling shows losing even around one per cent of adult females each year can push a population towards extinction.

For the Tapanuli orangutan, that danger is no longer theoretical. In November 2025, extreme rainfall from Cyclone Senyar triggered landslides across the Tapanuli orangutan’s largest remaining habitat block. The loss of a breeding female is therefore not simply the loss of one animal. It can mean the loss of all the offspring she might have produced over the following decades.

For a species numbering only in the hundreds, there is almost no demographic buffer left. A catastrophe lasting just days can inflict damage that takes decades to repair. Reconnecting the remaining populations is therefore critical. But Professor Serge Wich warns that connectivity itself must be carefully managed. Orangutans moving through restored corridors may still encounter open land and people, potentially increasing the risk of human-wildlife conflict and mortality. Without careful planning and collaboration with local communities, he warns, connections could become places where orangutans move into “and never reappear at the other end.”

For a species this small in size, keeping its surviving populations connected is essential to its long-term survival.



Tapanuli orangutan. Matt Senior.

Orangutans as forest protectors



A nest built by a Tapanuli orangutan (Pongo tapanuliensis) is seen on a tree branch in the Lubuk Raya Nature Reserve, part of the Batang Toru ecosystem. October 2026 Mighty Earth / Garry Lotulung

Saving the Tapanuli orangutan means protecting far more than one species. It also helps to safeguard the forest itself - and the countless other animals and plants that depend on it.[14]

As Asia's only great apes, orangutans play a vital role in keeping tropical forests healthy. They feed on a wide variety of fruits, swallowing seeds and carrying them through the canopy before depositing them elsewhere in their droppings. In doing so, they help trees spread, regenerate and maintain the diversity of the forest.

Their movements also shape the habitat around them. As they travel, feed and build new sleeping nests, orangutans break branches and alter vegetation, contributing to the forest's natural processes of renewal.

These roles make them important ecosystem gardeners and seed dispersers. Protecting the forest they need to survive can also help conserve a much wider range of wildlife.

Lose the orangutans and the consequences reach far beyond the disappearance of a single great ape.

Living alongside the Tapanuli Orangutan

The Batang Toru ecosystem is not only the last home of the Tapanuli orangutan, it is also a living, working landscape supporting thousands of families from indigenous Toba Batak and Angkola Batak communities, as well as migrants from the neighbouring island of Nias and other parts of Indonesia.

For generations, communities have made their living from rice fields, forest and mixed tree gardens known as agroforests, growing crops including rubber, coffee, cocoa, durian and kemenyan, or benzoin resin, alongside native trees. Sugar palm, or aren, is another important crop, tapped for sap which is boiled down to make palm sugar.



Palm sugar is processed inside a wooden hut in the Lubuk Raya Nature Reserve, part of the Batang Toru ecosystem, in South Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia, October 2026. Mighty Earth/Garry Lotulung.

These farms do not end neatly where the orangutan habitat begins. Fields and settlements are interwoven with the forests through which Tapanuli orangutans move, sometimes bringing people and one of the world's rarest great apes into conflict.



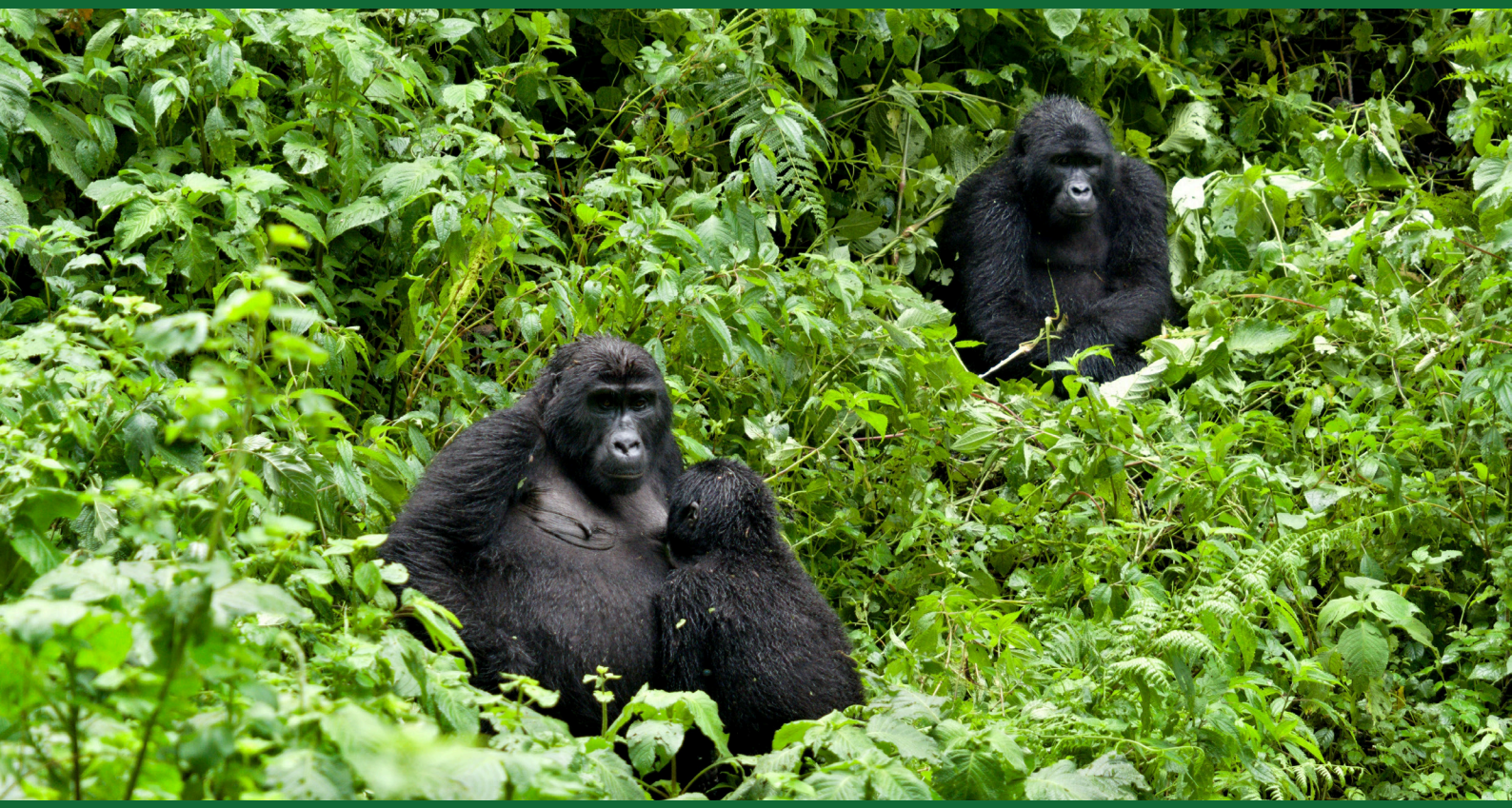
Robusta coffee trees grow along the forest edge in the Lubuk Raya Nature Reserve, part of the Batang Toru ecosystem, in South Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia, October 2026. Mighty Earth / Garry Lotulung

A 2024 study of 275 farmers in 11 villages found that 74 per cent identified crop-raiding as an impact of orangutans. Yet many saw animals entering their fields as hungry rather than inherently threatening. Crucially, 84 per cent attributed increasingly frequent incursions primarily to extractive industry.[15] Farmers backed solutions include stopping industrial deforestation, compensation for lost crops and alternative livelihoods such as improved agroforestry and developing community-based ecotourism. The latter could provide an important pathway for strengthening coexistence, building on local knowledge and previous efforts to establish community conservation cadres in areas such as Batang Toru and Marancar[16] Communities can be supported and fairly incentivised for their contributions, which could include monitoring orangutan presence, smart patrols, reporting habitat threats, and preventing and managing human-orangutan conflict.

The future of the Tapanuli orangutan is therefore tied to that of the communities living alongside this species.

Protecting it means preserving the forest while ensuring local people have secure, sustainable livelihoods - making them vital partners in the Tapanuli orangutan's recovery.

Extinction fightback: how mountain gorillas were brought back from the brink



When Sir David Attenborough encountered a mountain gorilla during filming for the BBC series Life on Earth in 1979, he feared he might be meeting "the last of their kind".

"When I first visited the mountain gorillas in 1979, the situation was dire; the number of these remarkable animals was dreadfully small. It is incredibly heartening therefore to see how the efforts of so many different groups – communities, governments, NGOs – have paid off. Now the challenge must be to ensure that these achievements are sustained long into the future."

Sir David Attenborough quoted in The Guardian, 31st May 2018

At the time, only around 400 survived as their forest home in the mountains of central Africa came under pressure from agriculture, logging, hunting and other human activity. Today, there are 1,063 - and growing - mountain gorillas across Uganda, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo - proof that a great ape pushed perilously close to extinction can recover.[17]

In 2018, the IUCN changed the mountain gorilla's status from Critically Endangered to Endangered following decades of intensive conservation. Recovery came by coordinated action by governments, conservationists



and communities via the International Gorilla Conservation Programme - backed by long-term funding and a strategy designed around the particular threats facing the mountain gorillas.

Carefully controlled tourism has been one part of that model. Revenue from visitors helps fund conservation and park management while supporting communities. Daily visits also mean the gorillas are closely monitored, their habitat is protected, snares are removed and veterinary teams can intervene quickly. This strategy could be just as important for the Tapanuli orangutan. Professor Serge Wich points to an example from Kalimantan, Indonesia where local people were paid to carry out wildlife observations.

Two villages subsequently introduced hunting bans themselves.

“They just decided that it makes sense to stop hunting when you get paid for observing animals,” he said.

While the mountain gorilla story does not provide a blueprint that can simply be transferred to Sumatra and the Tapanuli orangutan, it demonstrates what can be achieved when the survival of a great ape becomes a shared, long-term commitment.

Six steps to recovery for the Tapanuli orangutan



Tapanuli orangutan. Matt Senior.

Despite the scale of the crisis, there is widespread agreement among scientists and conservation groups that the Tapanuli orangutan can still be saved.

The knowledge, tools and opportunities to pull the species back from the brink already exist but no single organisation can reverse this decline alone. **What is needed now is coordinated action to use them to their full potential.**

Professor Serge Wich warns that conservation efforts cannot continue in isolation as "this will become an example where everybody tried in their own individual way and collectively we failed," he said, adding that it would be both "tragic and avoidable".



A general view shows the rainforest canopy in the Lubuk Raya Nature Reserve, part of the Batang Toru ecosystem, in South Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia, October, 2026. Mighty Earth / Garry Lotulung

Mighty Earth backs the recommendations of the IUCN Species Survival Commission Primate Specialist Group's Section on Great Apes (SGA) and is calling on all collaborating parties - including the Government of Indonesia, companies operating within the landscape including those with historical links to deforestation, local communities, conservation organisations, the financial sector and funding partners - to act collectively to ensure survival through a joint action plan.

Code Red does not have to mean managing the Tapanuli orangutan's decline. This warning siren should be the starting point for its recovery - rebuilding the population sufficiently for the species to move from critically endangered to endangered.

✓ 1. URGENT UPDATED SURVEYS

The full impact of Cyclone Senyar is still unknown. Updated surveys are urgently needed across the Tapanuli orangutan's range, particularly in devastated West Batang Toru, to establish how many of the species survived, where they remain and how much usable habitat is left. That information should be made publicly available as quickly as possible – even if the findings are bleak.

Isolated, small populations of Tapanuli orangutans have been found outside the ecosystem. Additional surveys should urgently extend across the species' historical range, particularly into areas not covered by the mapped habitat, to determine whether any previously undocumented populations survive. This could reveal Tapanuli orangutans still hiding in plain sight, while identifying critical habitat and potential areas that must be prioritised for immediate protection.[18]

This data should feed into an action plan, spearheaded by the IUCN, that would lay out a scientifically credible conservation roadmap to support the species recovery.

✓ 2. STOP LOSING FOREST AND RECONNECT WHAT REMAINS

There is now far too little habitat left to allow any further forest loss.

The IUCN has repeatedly called for a moratorium on the principal drivers of forest destruction – industrial expansion, smallholder agriculture and small-scale logging – alongside stronger governance, clearer land rights and greater protection through Indonesia's conservation and spatial-planning system.

We are backing the IUCN's call. But protecting what survives is only half the task - the forest fragments need to be reconnected.

Restoring connectivity between the remaining populations is critical to allow orangutans to move and breed, maintaining genetic diversity.

That means identifying precisely where forest corridors can still be restored and planting the trees orangutans actually need – including fruiting species – to create connected canopy.

Rope bridges may help some primates cross gaps[19] but should not be treated as a substitute for restoring forest connectivity where orangutans themselves are unlikely to use them. Road crossings and other engineering solutions must similarly be based on evidence that Tapanuli orangutans will actually use them.

Translocation should remain a last resort. If animals do have to be moved, they should be monitored afterwards to establish whether they survive rather than simply being released and assumed to have done so.

✓ 3. REBUILD THE WEST BLOCK

Before the cyclone, West Batang Toru contained by far the largest remaining population and represented the species' strongest hope of long-term survival.

Now parts of that landscape have been devastated by landslides.

Some damaged areas may take at least five to ten years before they can again provide useful orangutan habitat. In the worst-hit places, simply waiting for the forest to recover naturally may be too late.

Active restoration could include stabilising steep slopes, terracing where appropriate, raising native seedlings in nurseries and replanting damaged areas. But it is also vital to identify the key ongoing drivers for deforestation and habitat degradation in order to protect the ecosystem from further threats.

The need is urgent because the disaster is not necessarily over. Newly exposed forest edges remain vulnerable to further tree falls and degradation, potentially making regeneration harder.

The IUCN also recommends strengthening real-time fire-hotspot monitoring and ensuring rapid-response fire teams and local Fire Care Communities are ready across the landslide-affected landscape.

The need is urgent because the disaster is not necessarily over.

Newly exposed forest edges remain vulnerable to further tree falls and degradation, potentially making regeneration harder.

✓ 4. MAKE EVERY ORANGUTAN COUNT

For a species that reproduces so slowly, preventing further deaths is as important as restoring habitat.

The IUCN recommends a target of zero additional human-caused mortality. That means tackling hunting and human-wildlife conflict, preventing development from exposing animals to greater danger and ensuring restored corridors do not become death traps as orangutans attempt to move between forests. Systematic monitoring of orangutan deaths and conflict hotspots are also important, as well as, clear mitigation measures for development and company activities and a clear response mechanism when orangutans are at risk.

The loss of an adult female can remove not only one orangutan from the population but all the offspring she might have produced over the following decades.

✓ 5. PUT LOCAL PEOPLE AT THE HEART OF RECOVERY

Local communities should be recognised as key conservation partners, with Indigenous and local people meaningfully involved in decisions about the Tapanuli orangutan's recovery. Conservation measures must respect their rights and priorities, including land rights and access to livelihoods, while supporting opportunities that make keeping the forest standing economically worthwhile — from high-value agroforestry and non-timber forest products to carefully managed ecotourism, as seen in the recovery of the mountain gorilla.

In the eastern block that could mean identifying the villages most important for maintaining forest connections and concentrating investment there through alternative livelihoods, agroforestry, payments for successful habitat protection, land purchases where appropriate, joint patrols and conservation education.

Professor Serge Wich said the key to success was also making it clear the threats to the area not only severely impact wildlife but locals too.“ This is not only about orangutans, it's also about people," he said.

Restoring forests along rivers and in other strategically important areas could simultaneously expand orangutan habitat and help slow and hold water during extreme rainfall.

After witnessing the devastation inflicted on communities by the 2025 cyclone, we need a landscape-scale plan that makes both people and wildlife more resilient.

✓ 6. PAY FOR A RECOVERY – DON'T JUST AVOID EXTINCTION

None of this will happen without sustained funding.

The IUCN recommends securing conservation finance within Indonesia's legal framework while mobilising additional support from government, business, philanthropy and international partners. A conservation trust fund supported by companies operating in the area, with investment from the other agribusiness corporations could play a significant part.

The ambition should be much greater than simply keeping the last Tapanuli orangutans alive.

But money needs to follow a clear plan. Professor Wich says conservationists currently cannot confidently say how much is required to turn the species' fortunes around. A coordinated IUCN led action plan should establish what is already happening on the ground, what else needs to happen, who will deliver it, how much it will cost and how success will be measured. Conservation strategies should be monitored by a combination of on-the-ground and satellite monitoring to assess the progress of recovery.

The ambition should be much greater than simply keeping the last Tapanuli orangutans alive. Professor Wich believes the question should be: **What would it take to rebuild the population sufficiently for the species eventually to move from critically endangered to endangered?**

How to get everyone around the same table



Tapanuli orangutan. Aditya Sumitra for Image Dynamics.

Saving the Tapanuli orangutan will require conservation groups, scientists, businesses, local communities and government to work towards the same recovery plan.

Indonesia's Deputy Minister of Forestry Rohmat Marzuki has acknowledged that no single organisation can do it alone. "Orangutan conservation is a shared responsibility," he said. "Success can only be achieved through strong collaboration between the government, academics, conservation partners, the business world, and the community."

He has stressed that scientific data from population surveys should provide the foundation for targeted conservation policies, while the government is working to strengthen habitat protection and conservation management and improve cooperation between different groups.

The commitment forms part architecture which makes protecting species and biodiversity a national priority. But we need collaboration that goes further than individual organisations pursuing separate projects.

What is needed now "is an IUCN action plan," a single, scientifically led recovery plan that identifies and prioritises the biggest threats, assigns clear responsibility for tackling them, secures the funding and measures whether interventions are delivering results.

With such decisive action, the Tapanuli orangutan could become one of conservation's great recovery stories.

Conclusion: the choice is ours



Tapanuli Orangutan. Aditya Sumitra for Image Dynamics.

The Tapanuli orangutan is closer to extinction than at any point since the species was officially recognised. But its fate is not yet sealed.

The destruction caused by Cyclone Senyar in 2025 turned an already urgent situation into a critical one. A species numbering only in the hundreds has lost individuals and vast areas of habitat it could not afford to lose. Every surviving orangutan now matters. Every hectare of forest needs protection and every decision affecting the future of the Batang Toru landscape must be scrutinised.

What happens next will determine whether this disaster accelerates the species' decline or becomes the moment that finally galvanises the action needed to reverse it.

There is still time to turn Code Red into recovery. But that will require governments, communities, scientists, conservationists and businesses to act together - protecting the forests that remain, reconnecting fragmented populations, restoring devastated habitat and ensuring that no more orangutans are needlessly lost. It will also require sustained funding and a coordinated, scientifically led recovery plan ambitious enough not simply to prevent extinction, but to rebuild the population.

We know that recovery is possible. Around the world, great apes once feared to be on an irreversible path towards extinction have been brought back from the brink when governments, communities and conservationists committed to their survival.

The Tapanuli orangutan can become another conservation success story. But the window in which to make that happen is narrowing - fast.

This magnificent great ape cannot choose its future. But we can. With a population so perilously small, the time to act is not tomorrow. It is now.

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