
TOURIST TALES: ECO-TOURISM AND ORANGUTANS

by Constance Russell

All tours are tours of desire and tell us more about our society than about the society to be visited.¹

-Edward Bruner

In my own "tour of desire," I travelled in the Fall of 1992 to see the orangutans of Borneo. On a personal level, I had wanted to see orangutans in the wild ever since studying them in the zoo a number of years ago for my B.A. thesis. At the time, I was a psychology major specializing in animal behaviour, and had elected to do an observational study on sex differences in their play behaviour. I spent many hours watching these magnificent creatures, so like us, confined to such maddeningly small and barren quarters, and I longed to see them as they ought to be: in their own world, in context. But I also went as a researcher to document and analyze the other tourists' reactions to, and experiences with, the orangutans.

I visited the Orangutan Research and Conservation Project located in the Tanjung Puting Reserve in Kalimantan (Borneo), Indonesia. Because of financial difficulties, the director, primatologist Birute Galdikas opened the Project to eco-tourists. Through the auspices of "Earthwatch,"² tourists paid \$2100 (US), plus airfare, for the opportunity to act for two weeks as 'research assistants.' Dr. Galdikas has long been a strong supporter of eco-tourism. When asked how average people could improve the fate of orangutans, she replied: "One of the ways an individual can make a difference is by going to these places, where wild animals live, and making one's voice heard there through being a tourist, a modern eco-tourist who does not leave anything behind."³

Eco-tourism is increasingly being cited as a panacea for many current conservation woes, primarily because it addresses the economic contexts within which the non-human animals are forced to live, by providing financial incentives for wildlife conservation.⁴ This idea has been criticized, however, for it appears that it is rarely the local people who benefit financially. Also of concern is that such notions lead to

the commodification of wildlife. Thus, if there are few real financial incentives for local communities to put much effort into conservation practices, and if the animals are seen only as commodities, it is reasonable to assume that if other ventures, like cattle farming, seem more profitable, they will be pursued.⁵

Of even more interest to me is the other standard rationale for eco-tourism -- that it is a form of environmental education whereby tourists, through experiential learning, develop richer understandings of wildlife, the contexts within which the wildlife exists, and the particular challenges faced for continued survival. I would contend, however, that people embark on these journeys with preconceived notions about their travels and thus may not be open to the challenges offered them. Visitors, whether tourists or researchers, interpret their new surroundings through the context of their ideologies and from within the framework of their past experiences. We each construct our own stories to understand and describe our experiences.⁶

The Orangutan Project is the most popular of all Earthwatch destinations largely because of the orangutans. Tourists help research and conservation efforts through such tasks as following wild orangutans for up to fifteen miles a day to gather data on their feeding behaviour, carrying food fifteen miles to rehabilitant ex-captives, or carrying ironwood seven miles through thigh-high swamps, in equatorial heat, to build a park hut; this is no mere "high tea" with the mountain gorillas. (An extremely popular eco-tourist venture is taking tea with the gorillas of the Virunga Mountains. Tourists hike up the mountain, with the assistance of local guides who carry all their gear, nestle in beside a habituated gorilla group, and enjoy a picnic replete with champagne, caviar and other gastronomic delicacies.) Compared to other eco-tours, the educational opportunities at the Orangutan Project are

prime -- two weeks of experiential learning plus lectures by Dr. Galdikas and visiting scientists.

Obviously this type of vacation is not for everyone. These tourists were American, Canadian, British and Australian, ranging in age from 25 to 75, with the majority in their mid-thirties. All had some post-secondary education, and most had positions in the professions. Thus far, these qualities could characterize most tourists who embark on expensive trips. What set this group apart from most was their commitment to conservation. All were involved in environmental organizations in their homelands and all came with intent to 'do good.'

I have long suspected that the most effective way of provoking some feeling of connection with nature would be the actual experience of being in it. Since I personally find it difficult to translate into words my own feelings associated with being in nature, it seems futile to attempt to convince people on an intellectual level that they are not separate from and above, but rather part of, nature. People must *feel* it. Hence my interest in eco-tourism which is touted as a superlative environmental education opportunity.

And yet, as John Urry writes:

When we 'go away' we look at the environment with interest and curiosity. It speaks to us in ways we appreciate, or at least we anticipate that it will do so. In other words, we gaze at what we encounter. And this gaze is ... socially constructed and systematized.⁷

In other words, tourists, like everyone else, see what they want to see, what they expect to see. The notion that we socially construct our experience leads me to wonder what baggage we bring with us. Are we seeing ourselves as versions of Jane Goodall or as a member of the 'Wild Man' movement? Perhaps we see ourselves as the intrepid explorer, the animal lover, the collector of indigenous art, or the intelligent and inquiring academic? How do these self-concepts, and our related expectations as tourists, influence our attitudes about the non-human animals we observe? As Barbara Noske writes: "The place of animals has been very ambiguous, especially for the biological and the social sciences, since the animals form the bridge as well as the boundary between humanity and nature."⁸ It is partially because of this ambiguity that so many interpretations of the lives of animals are possible.

In Borneo, three stories emerged which seemed to define our interactions with the orangutans and I was a character in them all. These stories were not distinct, rather they oscillated in dominance, occasionally blurring into curious combinations. In general, though, we each stuck to one story seemingly in line

with our original motivations and expectations.

So, for each of us, the orangutans became different creatures. Most common among these creatures were the "Orangutan as Needy Child;" the "Orangutan as Pristine Nature;" and the "Orangutan as Subject for the Perfect Photograph."

Orangutan as Needy Child

With increasing Indonesian enforcement of the ban on trade in orangutans, the Project has found itself home to confiscated ex-captives. They invariably arrive young and traumatized from witnessing the murder of their mothers and from being kept in horrid conditions.⁹ The Project accepts these orangutans and attempts to rehabilitate them to the wild. Rehabilitation has become the primary activity of the Project and much of the publicity for fundraising emphasizes this work.

Thus many of the tourists arrived dreaming of their role in this story, that of working with the 'babies.' They were disappointed, however, as little of this work now occurs in easily accessed locations, mostly due to concerns about overloading the original study area with ex-captives. Still, they were able to have this prized contact with the young orangutans; it just meant hiking about fifteen miles per day carrying twenty pounds of fruit to remote feeding stations. This activity did not daunt most of the tourists, and about half of the group chose this as their primary task. When asked why, most explained that they felt the most needed with the young orangutans and that they loved the chance to comfort (i.e., cuddle) them.

On a similar note, all of the tourists commented on their feelings about interacting with an infant gibbon who too had been a victim of the pet trade. He constantly craved our touch (at six months, he should still be on his mother) and would emit loud whimpering cries if left alone. Like the orangutans, he was a needy fellow creature and it was incredibly satisfying to feel helpful. Yet there are many striking similarities between our actions and feelings and those which drive the pet trade. One theory posits that our attraction to animals with large heads, big eyes and short limbs (dubbed neoteny by psychologists) is the same as our parenting response to our own infants, merely generalized across the species boundary.¹⁰ Whatever the reason, it is ironic that one consequence of our attraction results in the pet trade of exotic, non-domesticated animals.

And one must ask, who benefits from our desire to help these young ex-captives? We certainly fulfill our parenting needs and return with our stories of communing with a 'wild' animal. Yet if the goal of the Project is truly rehabilitation to the wild, is contact with us in a caregiving role appropriate? I don't know the

answer to that one. When very young, I think these orangutans are comforted by having someone to cling to as a surrogate mother. But watching juveniles and adults looking to us for food and companionship was disturbing. I suppose a lot of this depends on what your definition of 'wild' is. Which brings us to the next story.

Orangutan as Pristine Nature

Like me, many members of the group had travelled to Borneo explicitly to see the orangutans in the wild. Most of our days, then, were spent walking up to twenty miles a day through the forest, necks craned upwards, searching for signs of the red ape. Two different tourists (not myself) were fortunate enough to find wild ones and their excitement was palpable. Those of us who did not find wild orangutans, however, did not leave disappointed. Anyone who spent a significant amount of time in the forest was rewarded with sightings of probiscus monkeys, gibbons, barking deer, mouse deer, rhinoceros hornbills... Such encounters were cherished, and the rarer the animal the more dear the experience became; we had joined the ranks of very few westerners.

This fascination with the rare in nature has probably been most obvious in birders who have often been criticized for their obsession with lists and who have been known to crush plants in their pursuit of the next elusive creature. Naturalists with other focal interests also fall into this trap. John Fowles recounts how, upon encountering a rare species of orchid, he measured it, mapped its location, photographed it, then left: "I realized I had not actually *seen* the three plants in the little colony we had found... I had managed to set the experience in a kind of present past, a having-looked."¹¹

Another essential element in the pristine nature story, of what Donna Haraway calls our "distant dream space,"¹² is the setting; that of few fellow tourists. As Urry notes, it is the eco-tourist who strives to "enjoy the unspoilt view before the crowds get there" and who desires "solitude, privacy, and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze." And what happens when those crowds do begin arriving? The "perceptual carrying capacity" is exceeded and the eco-tourists move on to yet another pristine area.¹³ Although a slower process than more traditional de-

velopment, the end result is the same.

Hence for those of us who advocate wilderness preservation (as opposed to conservation), implicit in our efforts is a desire to exclude any human intervention.¹⁴ Such an approach has been highly criticized, however, by 'developing' nations as just another form of neo-colonialism, totally lacking in any understanding of the role of humans in those natural settings.¹⁵

Orangutan as Subject of the Perfect Photograph

What struck me most was the importance of photography to the eco-tourist experience; I have never seen so much camera gear. The first orangutan encountered by each tourist was viewed through a lens and had at least one full roll of film devoted to it. This camera-crazy behaviour did calm down and subsequent ex-captives were photographed with more discretion. Still, it seemed that some of the tourists viewed

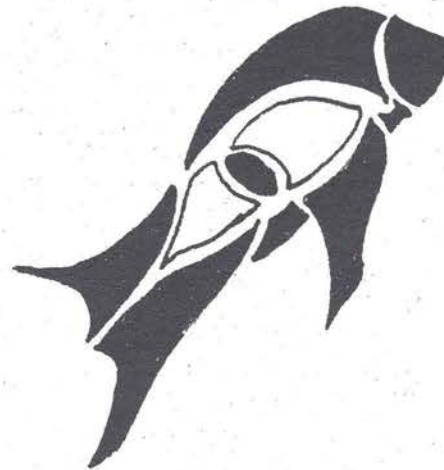
their entire trip through a camera lens. And that does make a difference; I noticed that when I had my camera to my eye waiting for that perfect shot, I experienced the world differently. Gone was anything on the periphery, gone was any context; I was focused on the object of my gaze and nothing else.

Such decontextualization and objectification can be troubling. While I do not agree with the overstated idea that shooting with a camera is just as destructive as shooting with a gun, I do think we need to consider

the implications of our uses of photography. Susan Sontag writes:

Guns have metamorphosed into cameras in this earnest comedy, the ecology safari.... When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures.¹⁶

I would also add: when we are seeking status, we shoot. Like the game trophies of the past, eco-tourists display their coveted shots with pride. But not any shot will suffice as a representation of our adventures. For example, since it is extremely difficult to photograph wild orangutans as they are generally sixty feet up in the 'underlit' canopy, great effort was made to ensure that the ex-captives looked wild. No buildings or other evidence of humans were present in



these treasured pictures. Unless, of course, it was the requisite 'me and an orangutan' shot.

But photography is not merely about distorting context or objectification. Rather, it can be a useful tool for transmitting our experiences in a non-verbal way. I have shown my orangutan pictures to many people, including school groups, and I find the photographs essential as they draw people into my stories about deforestation and the pet trade. We cannot all travel to Borneo to see the orangutans but through photography we can catch glimpses of their magnificence and our commonality.

Reflections

Analysis of each of these orangutan stories illustrates a number of potential problems with our relations to nature. Yet there I was, someone schooled in "environmental philosophy" acting no differently than any of the other tourists. Sure, I did on occasion question myself about my need to hold the gibbon, to see a wild orangutan, and to get stunning photographs. But that questioning didn't change much. When it came down to it, I couldn't convince myself I was really doing anything that wrong. This demonstrates to me either that my guiding theories are irrelevant to 'real' life or how deeply rooted I am in my culture. But maybe both are right; we can't pretend to live in an either/or world.

I do think that the stories we create about our fellow creatures are important and that our ways of interacting with other life need to be changed. But these changes will not come easily, if at all, and little will be gained from self-righteous judgements. There are some positive impacts of eco-tourism. The Orangutan Project was saved financially by eco-tourism; and has now become its main source of income. The public relations boon for orangutans is notable, working something like a chain letter. Each tourist, who from their experience developed new understandings of orangutans, recounts their stories to friends and families. Some tourists have begun speaking publically on the plight of orangutans. Others have displayed their photographs, written articles or created films about their experiences. As well, I did not see evidence of any of the problems described in the eco-tourist literature, like habitat destruction, that would be associated with our tromping about in the forest on our quests. That is probably a function of how few tourists travel to Tanjung Puting.

Still, the stories we create about our fellow creatures are important and need to be examined. There is one story that is not, and cannot, be told: the story of the orangutan as orangutan. It delights me that there are worlds beyond our comprehension, worlds which will never be described in any tourist's tale.

Notes

1. Edward M. Bruner, "Of Cannibals, Tourists, and Ethnographers," *Cultural Anthropology*, 4:4, (1988), p. 438.
 2. Earthwatch is an American non-profit organization whose mission is to provide funding for research projects that "improve human understanding of the planet, the diversity of its inhabitants, and the processes that affect the quality of life on Earth." The organization generates its funds by selling laypeople the opportunity to participate in research activities for two to three weeks.
 3. Susan Swanek & N. Glenn Perrett, "An Interview with Dr. Birute Galdikas," *Animal's Voice*, (Summer 1992), p. 8.
 4. Elizabeth Boo, *Eco-tourism: The Potentials and Pitfalls* (Washington, D.C.: World Wildlife Fund, 1990).
Joe Keenan, "Eco-tourism: Where Capitalism and Conservation Meet," *Mexico Journal*, (May 22, 1989), pp. 17 - 24.
Hortense Whelan, "Nature Tourism," *Environmental Conservation*, 15 (1988), p. 182.
 5. International Union for the Conservation of Nature, *World Conservation Strategy*, (Gland: IUCN, 1980), Section 7.
 6. Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990).
 7. Urry, p.20.
 8. Barbara Noske, *Humans and Other Animals: Beyond the Boundaries of Anthropology* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), p. 80.
 9. It is estimated that only 1 in 8 infants will survive to market. It is only infants, not unmanageable adults, that are desired in the mostly Japanese and Taiwanese pet trade for the going rate of U.S. \$40,000. Birute Galdikas, "Personal Communication," (1992).
 10. Neoteny was first coined by the ethologist Konrad Lorenz.
 11. John Fowles, "Seeing Nature Whole," *Harper's*, 259 (1979), p. 61.
 12. Donna Haraway, "Primateology is Politics By Other Means," In Ruth Bleier (ed.), *Feminist Approaches to Science* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1988), p. 78.
 13. Urry, pp. 42 & 45.
 14. T. Ranger, "Whose heritage is it?" *Journal of Southern African Heritages* (1989), p. 50.
 15. Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics* 11:1 (Spring 1989), pp. 71 - 83.
 16. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Delta, 1977), p. 77.
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