

Borneo BLUES

DUE TO RAMPANT DEFORESTATION, THE ORANGUTAN HAS BECOME ONE OF THE MOST ENDANGERED SPECIES IN BORNEO. ASIA TATLER TRACKS CHINESE ACTRESS **ZHANG ZIYI** INTO THE MALAYSIAN RAINFOREST ON HER MISSION TO RAISE AWARENESS OF THIS SPECTACULAR ANIMAL'S PLIGHT AND THE REGION'S FRAGILE ECOSYSTEM

WORDS BY LILI TAN PHOTOGRAPHY BY BASIL PAO







It's barely noon on

a Saturday in late September, the day before Hari Raya, the Muslim day of celebration that marks the culmination of Ramadan. The sun feels hotter than yesterday and the crew has been up since before sunrise, flying from Kota Kinabalu to Sandakan in Sabah to trail actress Zhang Ziyi into the Malaysian rainforest. The trail started long before we reached the rainforest though: all eyes were on Zhang as she arrived at the airport with her entourage. But the obvious stares didn't seem to bother Zhang, who has garnered attention since she was 19 years old, when she starred in her first role as the young Zhao Di in Zhang Yi-mou's *The Road Home*, and gained international stardom after her 2003 performance in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

BATH TIME

Zhang, wearing the polo shirt worn by volunteers of Sepilok Wildlife Clinic, helps wash one-year-old orangutan orphan Kala



Now she is 30, has played many more outstanding roles (for which she has won numerous awards and nominations), and recently added producer and comedic actress to her resumé. So it comes as somewhat of a surprise to hear her manager ask, “Did you wet your pants?” before bursting into laughter. Zhang, whose khaki trousers are drenched in a compromising area, isn’t fussed. She shakes her head, laughs and clomps up the stairs and inside to dab dry.

Zhang Ziyi’s Borneo

ABOUT HALF AN HOUR BEFORE THIS INCIDENT, the actress had emerged from the Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre’s lounge in oversized yellow rubber boots and sunglasses, and with the collar of her volunteer polo shirt popped, ready to bathe a baby orangutan.

She’s here at Sepilok in Sabah – a state of Malaysian Borneo that has undergone rapid deforestation since the 1960s and is now working to preserve its rainforests and the precious orangutans which reside in them – for the filming of the third episode in an environmental series



MONKEY BUSINESS
CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT
 Afiq the orangutan; Zhang and Rasa Ria Resort ranger Dino Joummy at the resort’s orangutan sanctuary; Zhang enjoys a sunset stroll; staff of the Sepilok Wildlife Clinic enjoy a group photo with Zhang; fishing in the Mengkabong

produced by Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts that will begin airing on the National Geographic Channel on November 14. The first two shows, in a series of four all starring Zhang, who is Shangri-La’s brand ambassador, have already been shot in Oman and Inner Mongolia, with the focus on protecting those particular ecosystems. After Zhang wraps in Borneo, her last stop will be the Maldives, where she hopes to raise awareness about its endangered coral reefs.

“I hope that by watching this series people can learn what I have learned,” says Zhang. Like many of us, the earnest actress is aware of environmental issues but is no expert or staunch activist: “Of course, I could have started this learning process earlier, but everywhere I go I understand a bit more.” By lending her name, famous face and innocent dialogue to the series, Zhang takes viewers along with her on her enlightening journeys in the hope that they, too, become more attentive to the issues that affect ecosystems around the world.

Adam Tomasek, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Heart of Borneo network ini-



LOCAL LIFE

FROM TOP In the clinic of Shangri-La's orangutan sanctuary, Zhang helps with a medical check of a baby orangutan; step back in time at the Monsopiad Village, which still contains human skulls presided over by the local bobohizan; the Hill Myna bird



tiative leader, agrees that Zhang's celebrity is effective in elevating consciousness. "One of the pitfalls of scientists such as myself or people who work in environmental conservation is that we almost expect people to understand all of the details," he says. "Someone like Zhang Ziyi who people recognise can go much further than any of us can in convincing the general public."


And by the looks of it, she's well on her way to captivating people – or rather her new friend is: a one-year-old baby orangutan named Kalabatu, or Kala for short, is climbing out of the shallow bucket she and senior wildlife ranger Sylvia Alsisto are bathing him in and hurls his damp, furry orange body onto Zhang with no intention of letting go (hence the soaking). His legs are now wrapped around Zhang's waist, his arms looped around her ribs, and his hairy cheek very affectionately resting on her chest as if she was his mummy. It is adorable.

Man of the Forest

KALA IS AN ORPHANED ORANGUTAN THAT WAS rescued by a team of rangers from the Sabah Wildlife Department. His mother could have fallen victim to various circumstances, including illegal logging, forest conversion and poaching, or have been trapped and then sold into the pet trade. This is why many baby orangutans end up at Sepilok, where they will be rehabilitated and reintroduced into the wild. Because of these issues, the orangutan has become a symbol of deforestation problems in Borneo and is one of the most endangered species in the island's rainforests. A century ago, there were an estimated 230,000 orangutans living in Borneo and Sumatra. Now, only about 60,000 remain – and 15,000 of those reside in Sabah.

Orangutan populations are naturally at risk, regardless of habitat destruction, because of their susceptibility to illness and low reproductive rates. Reaching the age of sexual maturity for females can take up to 12 years, and time between pregnancies is typically eight years.



A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white tank top, a dark woven hat, and a blue denim shirt tied around her waist, looks upwards with a smile. She is wearing a watch and a ring. In the background, a man in a khaki uniform with a circular patch on his chest looks to the side. The setting is a lush green forest.

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**KEEPING
WATCH**

Deep in the rainforest, Zhang watches as a dozen orangutan at various stages of rehabilitation gather for feeding

In the mid-80s, forest cover was at 75 per cent. By 2005, the wooded area fell to 50 per cent

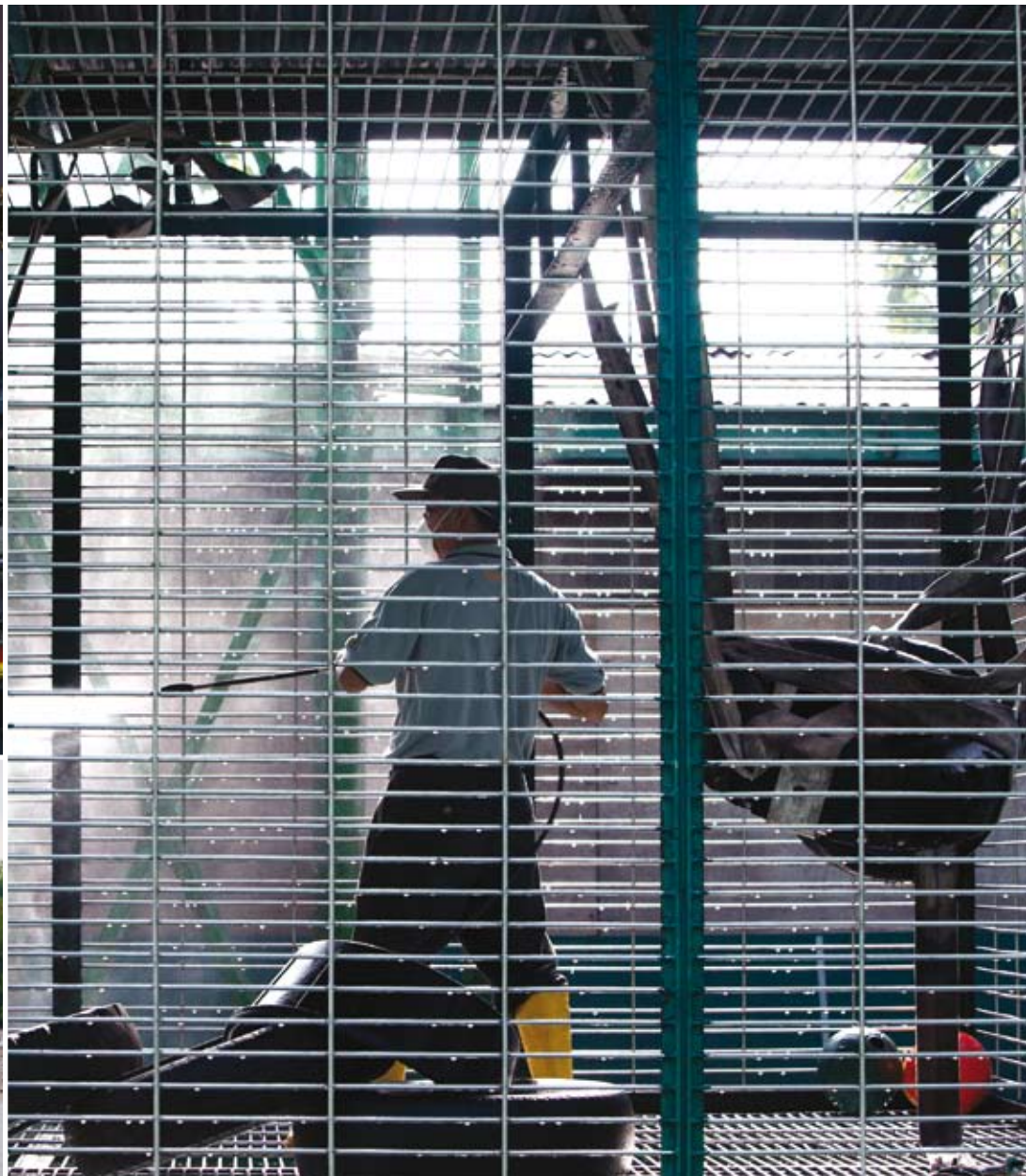
Therefore, if hunters kill even as little as one per cent of the species per year, the orangutan population is compromised. This makes poaching and illegal trade of orangutans the most significant threat to the survival of the species, after habitat loss, according to the WWF.

“Orangutans are capable of living in a forest that has been somewhat logged and degraded,” says Tomasek. “However, once this land gets turned into oil palm plantations and the orangutans lose their habitat, they move into the plantation searching for fruit.” That’s when they can be shot or trapped and sold into circuses in South-East Asia, or as pets.

Jungle Fever

AT THE MOMENT, MALAYSIA PRODUCES AND exports more palm oil than any other country in the world. In 1960, plantations took up 60,000ha, and by 2001 this number had grown to more than three million hectares. In 2004, more than 30 per cent of Malaysia’s oil palm plantations were in Sabah.

“Deforestation of native forest areas continues throughout South-East Asia,” says Eric Bettelheim, executive chairman and co-founder of Sustainable Forestry Management (SFM) and upcoming speaker at the next Intelligence Squared debate on climate change in Hong Kong



FREEDOM CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT

Children from the village play on the beach; Zhang meets Sabah’s minister of environment, Datuk Masidi Manjun; a ranger gives the orangutan’s play pen its daily scrub





HANGING OUT
FROM TOP
Something catches the orangutan's attention; bird life of the area; an orangutan swings from the sign of Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort's Nature Reserve



STYLIST: JOHNNY KHOO; HAIR: DAVID GAN FOR PASSION HAIR SALON SINGAPORE; MAKE-UP: TANG HONGYI FOR MAYBELLINE

on November 11. "Reforestation efforts, which provide a net increase in forest cover, are important but cannot provide the conservation value of native forests."

In the mid-80s, Borneo's forest cover was at 75 per cent. By 2005, the wooded area fell to 50 per cent. By 2020, if deforestation continues at this rate, it will drop to less than 33 per cent. This not only affects the orangutans' habitat, but also releases additional carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, thereby increasing global warming.

"As you cut down the rainforest, you're taking away the sink, the thing that absorbs the carbon dioxide," Tomasek explains. Peat swamps, essentially carbon-rich forests, are targeted for palm oil cultivation. Once these peat swamps are cleared, there is an immense release of carbon dioxide.

However, major oil palm plantation owners like Wilmar International contend they adhere to Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) criteria before developing land. "The land that is allocated to us is degraded rainforest, passed down to us by the government after being utilised by logging companies," says Sharon Chong, Wilmar's corporate social responsibility manager. "If, during our environmental impact assessment, we find unique fauna and flora species, then we set that land aside for conservation."

Wilmar International has hired 16 additional rangers to join the Sabah Wildlife Department's eight in protecting the area from active poachers, as well as being in talks with an environmental NGO to create an orangutan sanctuary in

Indonesia. Chong explains, "I hope to debunk this myth about oil palm plantations. I'm not saying that all companies aren't guilty, but as one of the leading producers in the world, we have a role to play in conservation and administer environmental considerations."

For Love or Money?

SABAH'S TOURISM, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT Minister, Masidi Manjun, has the daunting task of balancing commerce with conservation. "The biggest challenge for any government is managing human greed," he says. "We end up saying no to builders most of the time because we must insure that the cultivation of oil palms does not affect the habitat of the orangutan."

The minister goes on to explain that his target for Sabah's protected forest is 53 per cent. Currently, it's at 49 per cent. "Nature and tourism can coexist," he insists. "Our tagline is 'Less is More,' and we try not to destroy too much of our natural wonder in Sabah in our effort to bring in money for the country."

However, Bettelheim believes that concern for the environment is a luxury: "Once a certain freedom from anxieties about the cost of food, shelter, and health emerges in a country, concern for the environment takes on political dimensions," he says. "Education helps enormously, but people who struggle to survive or to reach acceptable levels of standard of living cannot be expected to care terribly much or have political power to affect the use of their environment. **T**

NATURE CALLS

The Nature Reserve, a joint effort between the Sabah State Wildlife Department and Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort, combines elements of tourism and conservation. Since its inception in 1996, the 26ha reserve, which is conveniently connected to the luxury resort in Kota Kinabalu, has rehabilitated 31 baby orangutans and moved them onto the next stage of the programme at Sepilok. Guests can observe the babies training and feeding twice a day. "For some, Sepilok is too far away, so we set up another one here for students who cannot afford to travel to East Malaysia," says director of conservation for Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort Sail Jamaluddin. This is also where guests can adopt a baby orangutan. Two days before her jungle trek, Zhang Ziyi sponsored one and named her Beijing, after her hometown. "I hope people from all over the world can come and adopt their own and name them after the city or street names where they're from," she says, continuing, "so we can know just how many people had come and cared for the orangutans." For more information on orangutan adoption, email rrr@shangri-la.com.