

Where orang utans see us in cages

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Comment

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PENANGITES are in for an exciting time. Even before the proposed "tiger eco-park" can take off, the Island is already echoing with roars heard right across the nation. Some of them are loud and desperate enough, like that of a hungry tiger, which could send shivers down the spine. All this in the name of tourism.

While the roaring and uproar will continue for some time, quietly, on another less noticed island, the country's first and only orang utan island is making a name for Malaysia.

Interestingly, this is not being done to pander the be-all and end-all of tourism, often at the expense of the locals.



A baby orang utan at the Bukit Merah Lake Town Resort orang utan reserve in 2007.

Rather it is more towards advancing scientific research and for the purpose of preservation and conservation of the "people of the forest", the orang utan.

This indeed is a noble idea and vision because while the orang utan is often presented as an iconic symbol to attract tourists, the average Malaysian knows little about them, less still, care about them.

Environmentalists and animal lovers claim that the species is endangered. Though North Borneo, namely the forests of Sabah, is regarded as the home of the orang utan, intense so-called development, involving more and more parts of the island, could eventually change the natural landscape and habitat of the orang utan.

Some sources are already claiming that the orang utans are dwindling in number and have launched campaigns to register their concern.

Of the estimated 30,000 orang utans left in the wild, about 20,000 are said to be in Borneo, with the remaining in Sumatra. In the long run, such claims can bring a bad name to Malaysia, the haven for diversity, rightly or wrongly.

Under the circumstances, most would resort to complaining and whining, without doing much to offer any assistance, let alone putting the money where their mouth is.

Not so one far-sighted person who has taken concrete steps to "save" the orang utan. Amazingly, he has dedicated an entire island to the cause of the orang utan.

What is more significant is that the island is nowhere near the island of North Borneo. Rather, it is situated at the Bukit Merah Laketown Resort, close to Taiping.

It is a relatively modest tropical island in the middle of the 7,000-acre freshwater lake where a number of orang utans are kept as close as possible to their natural habitat.

This was where a group of eminent scientists and researchers gathered last month to deliberate on the findings about the work done on the island to ensure the future of the orang utan.

The meeting gave full endorsement for what has been done.

Reportedly, this is the world's first orang utan conservation and rehabilitation centre of its kind, set up ex-situ to serve as a sanctuary to undertake close-up research and to better study the behaviour of this protected species.

For this purpose, the centre employs its own team of dedicated staff, headed by an experienced veterinary doctor devoted to the welfare of the orang utan.

Unusually, at the island, visitors are the ones caged up if they want to get a closer view of these intelligent primates while they roam in the jungle around them unhindered.

For a change, we are in the "zoo", so to speak, confined to a 100m-long "iron tunnel", while the orang utans remain free on the other side.

It is a rare experience for the visitors to observe "the people of the forest" and at the same time feel what it is like to be caged in like animals in the zoo. Of course, for these animals, this caging could last a lifetime.

The centre has a tailor-made nursery to look after "sick" orang utan babies, or those born "prematurely".

There are also facilities to train the animals to cope in the wild, increasing their chances of survival if they are released from captivity.

The animals and facilities are on a two-hectare site on the island, away from human habitation.

It is, therefore, not surprising that although the centre started with just a handful of orang utans barely a few years ago, the number has increased to more than 20 today.

But this is not the end of the story, not until all of them are released into the Belum jungle to enjoy the wilderness they deserve.

But for now, we are at least assured that the orang utan will be looked after as long the island continues to receive the necessary support for its extraordinary work of rehabilitating, preserving, developing and promoting orang utan conservation.

To Tan Sri Mustapha Kamal and his team, we thank you that the orang utan island is now uniquely placed on the world map.

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