



Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand

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14 Orangutans to be returned to Indonesia

Press release

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THE REAL STORY

Over the last 48 hours many stories have been posted by several media outlets on the repatriation of 14 orangutans that were smuggled into Thailand in 2007 and 2008. The Wildlife Friends Foundation Thailand wishes to respond to some errors in news stories and to reply to some concerns issued by wildlife conservation organizations and public zoos.

The history:

One of the 14 orangutans “Fook” was found by Edwin Wiek of the WFFT in 2007 in a private zoo resort called “Kaengpheka” in Chumporn Province. After weeks of pushing authorities to have her confiscated she was taken away from the zoo, but the owner was not charged with illegal wildlife possession. In late 2008 twelve more orangutans were found by Edwin Wiek, this time at the “Phuket Crocodile Farm and Tiger Zoo” on Phuket island. An official complaint was send (see attachment) to the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNP) in December 2008, but no action was taken until a repeat complaint was send in early February 2009. Within days after this complaint was send, with copies to the Nation Newspaper, the head of wildlife conservation of region 5 (South Thailand) Mr Vitthaya, called Edwin Wiek and told him he confiscated 12 orangutans from the accused Phuket zoo.

Edwin Wiek asked right after the arrest and confiscation for a copy of the police report, but after 4 weeks waiting and not seeing anything, went to visit the commander of Phuket province police, asking for more details. Edwin was then informed that there was not police report, legal case or investigation ongoing. The police was not aware of any crime.

After confronting Mr Vitthaya by phone, he confessed that he did not wish to charge the zoo owners with illegal possession of the orangutans as they were “influential people” and he considered the crime not really a serious issue. He further noted that he officially declared to his superiors in Bangkok that the 12 orangutans were found in cages along the highway instead, without knowing the owner(s). The orangutans were transported to the wildlife breeding center of the DNP in Ratchaburi province in the second week of 2009, to be kept there awaiting further steps, obviously not a legal process.

Campaign:

The WFFT has campaigned over the last few years for the start of legal proceedings against the owners of the zoo, for the following reasons;

1. A conviction by the court would have sped up the repatriation by many years, and would reduce the costs of care. An early return of the orangutans would have given them a decent chance to be released back to the wild in Indonesia. After 6 years of capture most of them are now too old.
2. The owners could, once convicted, be not only punished for their crime but also held responsible for all cost arisen from confiscation, care and repatriation in a civil court case.

3. WFFT believes that all cases of poaching, smuggling, trade and possession of protected wildlife should be taken to court as stipulated by Thai law and international treaties such as CITES. Neglect of the law will only result in increase of protected wildlife crimes.

4. The apes ending up in commercial zoos would have been inevitable if they would not be send back home.

Last campaign:

In 2013/2014 several commercial zoos in Thailand and wildlife traders had shown interest in purchasing the 14 orangutans for breeding programs and display in Thai zoos and entertainment parks. For exactly this reason we have campaigned very hard in the last 12 months for repatriation of the orangutans. Once the caught from the wild apes would have ended up in local zoos, our 7 year long campaign would have been for nothing and traders would see a good reason to import more illegally caught wildlife such as orangutans.

We wish to express our outmost gratitude to the director-general of the Department of National Parks Dr. Nipphon Chotibal and the director of wildlife conservation office Mrs Tuenjai Noochdamrong for their speedy approval to return the orangutan to the Indonesian authorities. Their decision has send a clear message to wildlife smugglers and zoos in Thailand that smuggled apes will never end up in the trade again.

We further thank the Indonesian for not giving up on the apes and politely urge them to find a suitable solution for these 14 victims of the illegal wildlife trade once they return back home. We hope the President of Indonesia will use this example to further strengthen the fight against the decline of orangutans in the wild, with stiff penalties for anyone poaching, trading or possessing orangutans and/or other protected wild animals. I am asking for help of orangutan conservation NGO's in Indonesia and abroad to join our campaign for a better future of these 14 orangutans.

Facts summoning:

- The orangutans were not found along the highway, but originated from a Phuket zoo.
- The owners of the zoo were never charged with illegal possession of protected wild animals.
- The cost of care of 3 million baht care would not have occurred if the laws were enforced from the start. A legal case would have sped up the release back to Indonesia with at least 5 years.
- CITES stipulated clearly that member states should enforce local wildlife laws and CITES regulations as well as cooperate (article 8) on repatriation of confiscated wildlife.
- Of the 14 orangutans, 13 are Bornean orangutans and one is an extremely rare Sumatran orangutan. Two are offspring of the original confiscated orangutans, one of the orangutans has died two years go.
- WFFT is currently building transport cages for the orangutans in Thailand that need to meet international standards of IATA. An exact date of departure has not been set as of today August 27th.

Lessons learned:

WFFT will petition the minister to change/scrap the law on keeping live plants/animals for a minimum period of 5 years, and take the conservation and animal welfare into consideration instead.

Thai law stipulates that illegal good/animals found need to be kept for 5 years, in case an owner shows up and claims these goods/animals. In this case however it was clear from the beginning that these orangutans belonged to one particular zoo in Phuket.

A personal note

I wish to apologize to the orangutans that it took this long, that you guys had to go through all this trouble and misery for so many years. I have fought many years for your return, and I promise I will follow up on your progress once you are back home again.

Edwin Wiek
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