

2013 P.I.C.A Grant Summary
"Orangutan SSP Field Visit / Malaysia "
By Danielle Williams

For my 2012 Pi[C]a grant project, I participated in the 2013 Orangutan SSP Field Visit to Matang Wildlife Center (MWC). MWC is located within Kubah National Park which is approximately 45 minutes outside Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, Malaysia on the island of Borneo. MWC, managed by Sarawak Forestry Corporation, is primarily a center for rescued and confiscated wildlife, including orangutans, macaques, sun bears, gibbons, hornbills, civets, binturong, and more. One of the ways MWC meets its goals of education, awareness, and recreation is to exhibit some of the animals not suitable for release for tourists. The trip was coordinated by Ronda Schwetz the Orangutan SSP Field Advisor and Director of the Henry Villas Zoo in Madison, Wisconsin and Guillaume Feldmen, Director Red Endangered Animal Connection Trust (REACT). Once at MWC we worked under the guidance of Leo Biddle of Orangutan Project (<http://savingmonkeys.org/>). Orangutan Project is a NGO based in Sarawak that "specializes in volunteer projects and tourism that aims to provide both physical and financial assistance to conservation projects in need." They accept volunteers for either 2 or 4 week projects with funds going to conservation, and they have a "hands off" policy with the animals. The coordination of all of these people and groups made our visit possible.

While we were scheduled as a two week (August 1-14, 2013) volunteer group via Orangutan Project, our experience was different than that of a typical volunteer. Our group of seven included five orangutan/primate keepers from AZA institutions, Ronda Schwetz, and Megan Elder the Orangutan SSP Vice Chair and International Studbook Keeper. Due to the skill level of the group, our visit focused not only on assisting with husbandry as needed but also on increasing the presence of enrichment and behavioral training for both the animals and the staff. In terms of enrichment, we wanted to create permanent and/or long-lasting items. Additionally we aimed to furnish many smaller enrichment items along with associated design plans and enrichment resources. Mike Zedeker (Columbus Zoo & Aquarium) and Crystal Champeau-Williams (Racine Zoo) focused on this particular goal whereas Tanya Howard (San Diego Zoo), Stephanie Schuler (Cincinnati Zoo), and I focused on training.

I was assigned to work with three female orangutans currently housed within the quarantine area. My specific goals were to strengthen their trade behavior and to formulate hand injection/blood draw behavior. I had full access to the orangutans' diets, and the full work day to shape the behaviors. My first couple days were spent establishing a relationship with each of the orangutans – hand feeding them and providing enrichment items. I also began building the bridge, and during this same time period I worked in conjunction with one of the Sarawak Forestry keepers. We reviewed why a bridge is used and how it is built during sessions with the orangutans. After the first couple days, this particular worker left for holiday so I proceeded with training myself while keeping Leo updated on progress. For reasons of safety, I worked on a shoulder presentation behavior for the injection site. Sandy and Shirley progressed pretty quickly in this area; however, Maria (though definitely appreciative of the attention) was not keen on being touched by me on any part of her body. As our group began implementing plans for permanent enrichment fixtures, I also had sessions where I simply

reinforced the orangutans for positive behaviors when staff was above their enclosures. By the end of the volunteer period, I was able to “stick” each of the orangutans with a blunted needle on cue, and Sandy had also learned both a “come here” and “turn around” behavior. I spent sessions individually with Leo and another Orangutan Project staff member to explain the progress and groundwork I had laid for each of the orangutan’s training program.

Our group had great success in meeting our goals at MWC. In between training sessions on any given day I assisted with animal husbandry and the building of enrichment items. We were able to create over 100 items for current staff and future volunteers to utilize, including thirty water holders for many of the smaller primates. Over lunch and dinner periods, we exchanged many ideas with Orangutan Project staff about current practices in accredited United States zoos that are different than what is common throughout the region of Southeast Asia. On our last day at the wildlife center, Ronda and Megan gave presentations for the MWC staff, including safety and PPE that we provided from each of our institutions. This volunteer project was an invaluable learning experience on many levels – from seeing the physical changes palm oil has on the landscape to gaining a better understanding of how social norms impact the way animal care is practiced. I appreciate that I was able to receive this grant, and I hope to return in the future to assist further in any way I can.