

By Andrea Busfield

EXPERTS fear that the wild orangutan may be consigned to the history books within 50 years, another animal driven to extinction by human greed and climate change. But a small army of women are working to buck that trend and their commitment, whether on the ground or in the laboratory, is yielding excellent results.

The Lamandau Wildlife Reserve in Borneo reported last year the birth of seven healthy baby orangutans, much to the surprise and delight of staff who expect to see two or three newborns a year.

"These orangutans were reintroduced to the wild in the late 90s," says Ashley Leiman, OBE, founder of the UK-registered charity, Orangutan Foundation. "Today, they are all wild, but from an ex-captive background. Since we reintroduced them to the reserve there have been more than 85 births, but last year was quite incredible because we had seven births.

"From a conservation protection point of view, there can be no better result than to see an increase in the population of a diminishing species."

The population of Bornean orangutans has declined by 55 per cent in the past ten years, with numbers falling from 230,000 to 104,700 and expected to fall further to 47,000 by 2025. It is no coincidence that their natural habitat, the rainforest, has also shrunk by the same percentage in the past 30 years.

For Ashley, it was the future of the rainforest that initially stirred her to action in the 1970s.

"I visited the Taman Negara national park in Malaysia and that was where it all started. I walked through this incredible primary forest and just knew that it had to be saved. I also knew that if we were going to save the trees, we would need the species of the forest.

The simple truth is, that orangutans can't survive without trees and trees can't survive without orangutans."

ACCORDING to the World Wide Fund for Nature, one of the biggest drivers of deforestation in Borneo has been the growth of oil palm plantations. But while reports of rainforest destruction wrought by large plantations have made headlines, recent satellite images indicate rainforest loss in Indonesia is mainly driven by smallholders.

It's a worrying trend that has led the world's biggest supplier of sustainable palm oil to invest £26.5million into solving the problem.

Sime Darby Plantation (SDP) has been using DNA fingerprinting to cultivate higher yielding palms to meet an ever-growing demand for palm oil, present in more than half the products on supermarket shelves.

In trials, GenomeSelect seeds produced an oil yield increase of up to 20 per cent and the company plans to share this breakthrough with smallholders. Dr Sukpanah Apparaw, Manager for Molecular Breeding at



ON A MISSION: From the top, Michelle Desilets, Dr Sukpanah Apparaw, Ashley Leiman and Sue Sheward use their own particular skills to support the orangutans

the SDP laboratory in Malaysia, said: "We have to meet this need for global consumption of palm oil, and by studying DNA patterns, we came up with a novel genetic prediction technology that helped us predict high-yielding palms which we tested in the lab and then transferred to our fields. "Our initial prediction was an increase in oil yield of 15 per cent, enabling it to feed an extra 15 million people, but four years into the study we saw the yield is actually up to 20 per cent more."

Finding a way to squeeze an extra 20 per cent out of oil palm crops



LIFELINE: £3million has been raised to support the work of Borneo's Sepilok Rehabilitation Centre

International army of women battling to save the orangutan

These adorable apes are facing extinction, but from the lab to the rainforest, a global fight is underway to ensure their survival

without further ravaging the rainforest won SDP a coveted Edison Award in 2017.

"This is nothing to do with changing the DNA or genetic engineering or cloning," Dr Apparaw said. "GenomeSelect is a naturally selected palm. We have not changed or modified the pattern. It's very safe and, at the same time, we also aim to sell better planting materials to smallholders, to encourage them not to expand.

"We want to influence the rest of the industry players because if we don't, the forest is going to get

used up, affecting the biodiversity of the world. We need to find that balance again."

But the balance between nature and humanity is one of the biggest challenges for environmental groups in the area. "A major problem we see is that villages are getting larger and the forests are getting smaller and orangutans are now going into orchards," says Ashley.

"Local people are not too happy when they find all their pineapple plants and bananas have been taken, and we probably get more

rescues from communities now than oil palm plantations."

For 75-year-old Sue Sheward, MBE, it was exactly this collision of worlds that moved her to devote her life to saving orangutans. The former Ministry of Agriculture worker from Surrey was in her early forties when she fulfilled a life-long desire to see the apes in their natural habitat.

Which is how she came to be at the cash-starved, government-run Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre in Sandakan, where she came across King, an adult male

orangutan being held in a tiny cage. Staff could not release him because he kept harassing local villagers.

"I said I would build King a playpen and I was told it was a nice idea, but it would cost at least £7,000," recalls Sue. "So, I returned home and started doing meat raffles at my local pub.

"The first week, I made £3.50, but within nine months I'd made enough money to build this playpen for King, who was about 23 at that stage and absolutely beautiful."

When Sue returned to Sandakan with the money, the staff were so

impressed, they asked if she could raise more, and Orangutan Appeal was launched. In a little over 20 years, Sue has managed to pull in an impressive £3million, paying the wages of a small dedicated team of nine and transforming the centre with state-of-the-art equipment.

Sue also carried out the first helicopter drop to rehome an orangutan into the heart of the rainforest - and that orangutan was King.

She said: "I was told he couldn't be released because he would have to go into the middle of the forest away from any houses or villages and it would be very difficult because there were no roads.

"So I raised money for a helicopter, hired three people to trek out ahead of us and we flew him there. He was sedated in a crate and I sat and held his hand all the way.

"When we arrived, he rested for four hours before getting up and shaking himself down.

"Before he disappeared into the trees, he looked over his shoulder, right at me, and it was almost like he was saying 'thank you'. It was so emotional. That's when I knew this was my life now; this is what I have to do."

ONE of the major concerns for environmentalists is that 80 per cent of wild orangutans in the Indonesian portion of Borneo live outside national parks and other protected areas. If an orangutan's habitat isn't protected by the government, it usually falls within vast tracts of land belonging to logging, plantation or mining companies.

The Orangutan Land Trust (OLT) focuses on supporting the preservation, restoration and protection of forests in areas where orangutans naturally exist.

OLT's American executive director Michelle Desilets also helped create the Nyaru Menteng Orangutan Rehabilitation Project in the late 90s alongside a Danish woman, Lone Droscher Nielsen.

It has since become the world's largest primate rescue project, saving more than 1,000 orangutans over the years and employing more than 200 local staff.

"There are some amazing people from all around the world doing amazing things, but the ones who don't get any attention, despite deserving the most attention, are the Indonesian and Malaysian women looking after the orangutans in our rescue centres, day in, day out, giving them the love that they've lost from the loss of their own mothers. They are the unsung heroes of this story."

As part of OLT's mission to seek sustainable ways to ensure the survival of orangutans, Michelle devotes much of her energy to working with palm oil supply chains to deliver deforestation-free, sustainable palm oil.

"I attract a lot of trolls who think I'm in the business of killing orangutans or that I must be paid off by the palm oil industry, which shows how angry the discussion has become," she said, "but boycotting palm oil is not the solution and alternative crops are potentially worse and more land hungry.

"Sustainably-produced palm oil is the only way to stop deforestation, and save the natural habitat of orangutans."