

To what extent are safe distancing guidelines for viewing orangutans adhered to by tourists in Bukit Lawang, Indonesia?

BACKGROUND

- Sumatran orangutans *Pongo abelii* (Fig.1) are **Critically Endangered** with the remaining population restricted to a small area within Indonesia (Fig.2)
- Bukit Lawang is a popular site for seeing them (Fig.2) but often **tourists get very close to orangutans**
- A study in 2014 highlighted a **need for safer distances to be enforced here**
- This is because **close contact risks the spread of disease** – including COVID19 - from humans
- Currently guidelines by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) **define a safe distance as 10m**



Figure 1 – Sumatran orangutans have the highest possible threat to extinction

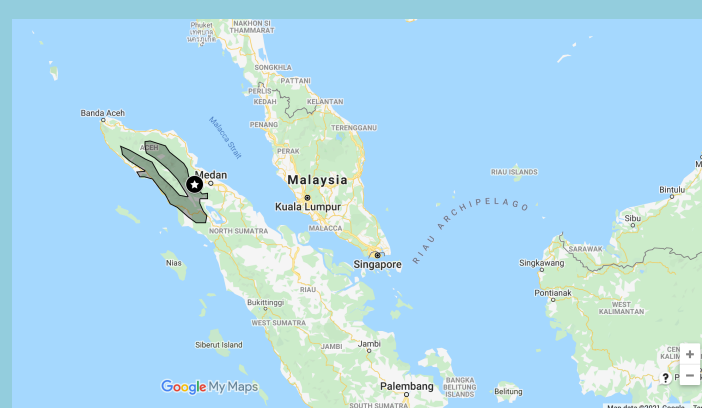


Figure 2 – Bukit Lawang, labelled here with the star is a popular area for seeing Sumatran Orangutans, with estimated range highlighted in black

AIMS

This study utilised Trip Advisor photo galleries to answer three key questions:

- 1) What percentage of tour agencies have **at least one photo involving close contact (CC) or touching of orangutans?**
- 2) Has there been a **decline in the number of photos involving CC** since recommendations in 2014 ?
- 3) Does the **presence of a policy** detailing safe distances on a tour agency website **reduce the number of photos including CC?**

METHODOLOGY

- 1) A TripAdvisor search for the term 'wildlife tour' was carried out with location 'Bukit Lawang'. The **ten most popular tour agencies were selected**
- 2) The **oldest and most recent 100 photos uploaded by tourists** for were **viewed for each**, covering an average time span of 5 years (2015-2020) (Figure 3)
- 3) The **number of photos involving close contact and touching were recorded**
- 4) Tour company websites were accessed to **assess the impact of a policy detailing safe distances**

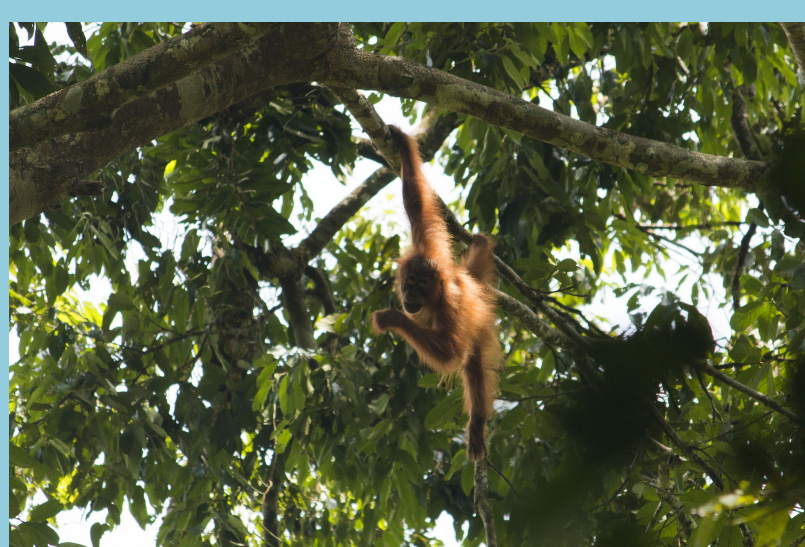
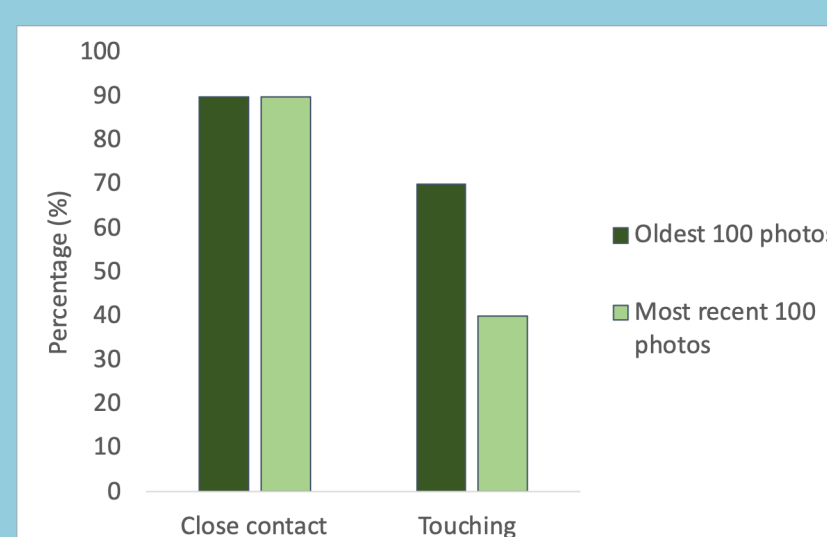


Figure 3
An example of a tourist photo from Bukit Lawang – close contact was recorded if humans and orangutans were both visible in the frame

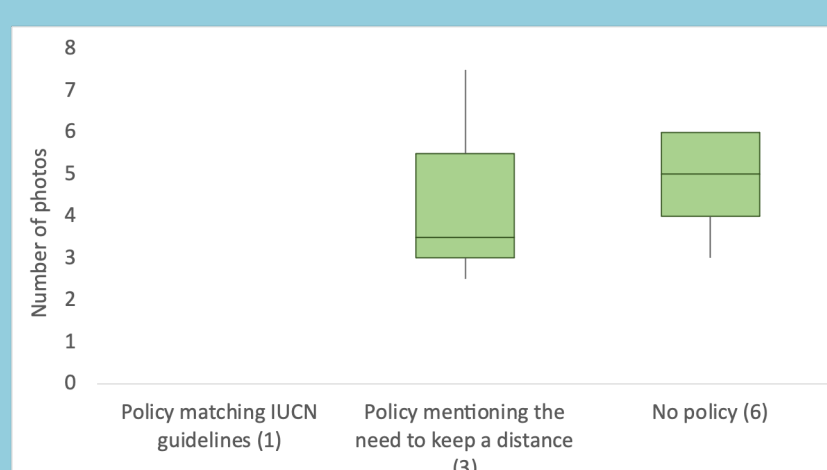
RESULTS



For most companies (90%) at least one incidence of CC was observed, and this did not change over the time period. There was, however, a **reduction by almost half in the proportion of companies for which touching of orangutans was observed**



The average frequency with which photos involving CC were uploaded did not markedly change over time, although the **maximum number observed dropped from 15 to 7 per 100 photos**



Presence of a policy regarding distancing didn't have a marked impact on number of CC photos observed **unless it matched IUCN guidelines**

CONCLUSION

- Most tour companies had at least once instance of CC with no marked change in frequency over time**
- The **percentage of companies for which photos involving touching were uploaded reduced by almost half**, suggesting **behavioural change is possible**
- A **policy matching IUCN guidelines may have an impact on reducing instances of CC** but a larger sample size is needed
- Conclusions rely only on photos uploaded by tourists.** This is intended to be **only a snapshot** of what may be occurring 'on the ground'

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) **Educational campaigns** are needed to **inform tourists** of why the 10m rule is important (Fig.4)
- 2) **Policies that match IUCN guidelines need to be more clearly enforced and communicated**
- 3) **Trip advisor banned sales to attractions allowing contact with wild animals in 2016 (Fig.5).** They **could also refuse to endorse companies that still allow it**



Figure 4 – an infographic campaign on safe distances



Figure 5 – TripAdvisor banned sales to attractions such as these, allowing contact with wild animals

References

Figure 1 sourced from Jorge Franganillo on Unsplash accessed on 1 April 2021
Figure 2 created with <https://www.google.co.uk/maps/about/mymaps/> accessed on 1 April 2021
Figure 3 sourced from vandaagevinniet from Pixabay accessed on 1 April 2021
Figure 4 sourced from Andrea Molyneux @greenhillbukitlawang (with permission) via <https://www.greenhillbukitlawang.com/covid19-and-safe-trekking>, accessed on 2 April 2021
Figure 5 sourced JessicaBlueElephants from Pixabay accessed on 2 April 2021