

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

— SPRING 2024 —

■ GUIDING BORNEAN
ELEPHANT TRAFFIC

■ A HISTORIC SPIDER
MONKEY BIRTH

■ RAISING AND REWILDING
LEOPARD SHARKS



WCN

Wildlife Conservation Network

Guiding Bornean Elephant Traffic

In addition to reducing human-elephant conflict, Seratu Aatai intends to follow in the footsteps of Hutan, another WCN Partner in Malaysian Borneo, by purchasing land to expand the forest along Kinabatangan River that Bornean elephants and orangutans rely on.



Above: Bornean elephants in Lower Kinabatangan. Opposite page, top to bottom: Elephant herds must often pass through villages to reach other parts of their forest. An electric fence around a village border. Seratu Aatai's community wardens helping assemble a low-voltage electric fence.

The sun sank beneath the tree line as a trio barely in their twenties stood outside the low-voltage electric fence surrounding their village. As their flashlight beams reached into the darkening brush, they heard the snapping of branches and thudding footsteps of the approaching herd. They asked the villagers behind the fence to move back as they readied to open the gate and allow the elephants to pass. These members of Seratu Aatai's Community Honorary Wildlife Wardens program keep the peace between communities and the Bornean elephants that must carefully cross through human settlements to traverse their habitat.

Approximately 1,500 Bornean elephants remain in Malaysian Borneo, with about 250 living in

the fragmented forest of the Lower Kinabatangan region. They are genetically distinct from and typically smaller than the elephants of mainland Asia, but that doesn't prevent local people from being intimidated by their size. Since most of Lower Kinabatangan's forest has been lost to human settlements and palm oil plantations, the elephants can't help but come into contact with people as they forage and migrate. This can lead to raided crops and damaged property, creating conflict between people and elephants.

Seratu Aatai, one of the latest additions to WCN's Partner Network, created their warden program so that young people from villages regularly visited by elephants can act as ambassadors who prevent conflict and promote coexistence. Seratu Aatai tracks elephants via GPS collars and

alerts wardens when those elephants are seen moving toward villages, allowing the wardens to intercept and divert the herds. Wardens spend a lot of time teaching landowners how to prepare for and calmly de-escalate encounters with their giant neighbors. Erecting fences around the villages is one mitigation method, but to ensure that the elephants can still roam what's left of their forest, wardens operate spring gates in the fences so the elephants can pass through villages on deliberate pathways without causing any damage. They're very careful not to be too aggressive or make the elephants anxious, otherwise that can cause the herd to stay longer.

Later this year, Seratu Aatai will expand this effective program into Central Sabah, a massive forest region where the largest Bornean elephant population—1,000 individuals—is found. This region is much larger and more rural than Lower Kinabatangan, and the elephant population here comes across people far less frequently. So while conflict incidents may be fewer, they may also be more delicate. Seratu Aatai is recruiting up to 15 new wardens to pilot this program in Central Sabah so that the people living and working there will be prepared for eventual elephant encounters.

Seratu Aatai's community wardens also help wildlife authorities remove bushmeat snares that might injure baby elephants, which can cause a herd to linger near villages.

Such encounters have become common for the young trio of wardens, who patiently held the gate open for the elephants to pass. Although they knew a long night lay ahead of them, lack of sleep was a fair price for keeping peace between the village and the herd. Seratu Aatai and their wardens are sparing no effort to build trust with communities and continue encouraging safer interactions between them and Bornean elephants. ■



A Historic Spider Monkey Birth

The staff looked up with growing concern at Arawi, who was perched on a narrow tree branch high in the canopy. From far below, they could see that she was going into labor. Witnessing spider monkey births is particularly rare because it typically happens in remote locations at night. In addition, at 25 years old, Arawi was considered elderly and very unlikely to be pregnant at all. Mild concern soon turned to gasps as conservationists from Proyecto Washu (PW) saw Arawi's newborn dangling by its umbilical cord nearly 50 feet above ground. This stress evaporated as soon as Arawi scooped up her infant and began cleaning him, allowing the staff to celebrate this major milestone—the first brown-headed spider monkey birth ever documented.

Proyecto Washu, one of WCN's newest Conservation Partners, named this baby monkey Anku, which means "resistant." That name could easily be applied to any of the 22 spider monkeys in PW's rehabilitation center, where Anku was born. Arawi and these other monkeys were rescued from the illegal pet trade and live under PW's care. While these rescued individuals are unable to return to the wild, their offspring will one day be reintroduced to the Chocó forest of northern and central Ecuador and help rebuild their population.

Brown-headed spider monkeys are Critically Endangered and some of Earth's rarest primates. Found only in the Chocó, these monkeys play a key role in their ecosystem by dispersing seeds from fruit they eat, promoting new forest growth. The species is entirely arboreal, meaning they never leave the safety of the trees to touch the ground, where predators await. But because of this, they are particularly vulnerable to deforestation for cattle ranching and agricultural use, which is common in Ecuador. Habitat loss, in addition to poaching for the pet trade, has pushed their ever-shrinking population dangerously close to extinction.

Proyecto Washu's mission is to save the species by reducing these threats. It's impossible to know just how many brown-headed spider monkeys still exist in the wild since much of the Chocó is inaccessible, but PW is confident that their remaining population is very fragile. To protect the Chocó forest, PW works with local communities to provide them with sustainable economic opportunities, so they can support their livelihoods without needing to cut down the trees that spider monkeys rely on. In addition to habitat protection, PW also conducts research on wild brown-headed spider monkeys to gain insights into their ecology, behavior, and population health.

Arawi and Anku are recovering comfortably in PW's facility. She proudly shows off Anku to her caretakers, and will nurse and teach him how to be an adult for the next four to six years until he is ready for release into the Chocó. PW feels fortunate to have shared this rare experience with Arawi, and now as a WCN Partner, they will be better equipped to give spider monkeys like Anku the best chance at succeeding in the wild. ■



**Arawi and
her new
baby, Anku.**

Raising and Rewilding Leopard Sharks

Kyra Bestari leaned over the tank rim while clutching the sea snail. Dipping her hand beneath the water's surface, she extended the offering toward the small shark pup slowly approaching. Gently, it snatched the snail and darted in a blur into a deeper corner of the tank. As a "shark nanny," Kyra feeds and cares for Indo-Pacific leopard shark pups for Misool Foundation, a new WCN Conservation Partner. Misool Foundation manages a nursery for these sharks, which are part of a first-of-its-kind reintroduction project led by ReShark that will restore the species to one of its historic marine ecosystems in Indonesia's Raja Ampat archipelago.

ReShark is an international collective of over 90 conservation organizations, government agencies, and aquariums dedicated to reintroducing endangered sharks to the wild. Indo-Pacific leopard sharks are functionally extinct in Raja Ampat due to years of intensive shark finning. However, Misool Foundation has spent over a decade contributing to the creation of a network of marine protected areas in the archipelago, including Misool Marine Reserve and the Raja Ampat Shark and Ray Sanctuary. They have also helped protect the archipelago's colorful coral reef ecosystems, work that is now dovetailing into the rewilding of larger species, like leopard sharks, which couldn't return here without this reintroduction project.

With shark finning now eliminated in the region, Raja Ampat is the perfect location to reintroduce the sharks. It begins in ReShark's partner aquariums, where eggs are collected from captive leopard sharks that are genetically compatible with the Indonesian subpopulation. These eggs are carefully transported to Misool Foundation's nursery at Raja Ampat, where they are transferred to special tanks and monitored by marine scientists like Kyra. For months, Kyra and fellow "shark nannies" record the eggs' development, and once they hatch, they look after the newborn sharks and feed them snails. When the pups reach a suitable size and weight, Kyra transfers them to a special open water pen so they can acclimate to their new habitat and learn to live wild. She continues to monitor them there, regularly diving into the sea pen to feed the young sharks that she's raised like her own.

When a leopard shark is ready to be released, Kyra attaches a small acoustic tag so her team can track its movements in the wild. Misool Marine Reserve is protected by rangers, so the sharks that Kyra has spent so long nurturing will be safe from fishers. The team released their first leopard shark, Mali, in July 2023, and plans to soon release 10 more that Kyra and her colleagues have reared in their nursery. The goal is to hatch and release 500 leopard sharks over the next 5-10 years to create a

self-sustaining population in Raja Ampat, and to replicate this project with other endangered shark species.

Although Kyra will miss her sharks on the day they swim away, she's thrilled to know that she and Misool Foundation are part of a powerful international effort to return leopard sharks to Raja Ampat for good, and that her efforts helped prepare them to swim free. ■



Alex Lindblom



Putro Pambajeng

Top: A young leopard shark being fed in one of Misool Foundation's open water pens prior to release. **Inset:** Kyra Bestari caring for a leopard shark pup in Misool Foundation's nursery. **Bottom:** Raja Ampat archipelago.





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