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The Absent Agent: Orangutans, Communities, and Conservation in Indonesian Borneo

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Abstract

In a time of unprecedented species loss, whose absence matters in international biodiversity conservation? Who or what is made absent in this process, and how? Drawing on scholarship that focuses on the agency of absence, this article explores how the orangutan (*Pongo spp.*)—a popular conservation flagship species—becomes present in Bornean villagers’ lives. It offers a new understanding of flagship species action by examining the complex, often unseen relational dynamics through which orangutans influence community-conservation encounters. As the study shows, conservationists’ efforts to mitigate the absence of species through a combination of imaginative, discursive, and material variables inadvertently ‘absences’ Bornean villagers and their concerns. Reflecting on this process of absencing, the paper moreover discusses how notions of absence inform contemporary conservation thought and action.

Keywords: absence, flagship species, extinction, orangutan conservation, Indonesia, Borneo

INTRODUCTION

“For what [reason] are they releasing orangutans here?” Usup¹ asked, shaking his head in disbelief. “I don’t know,” I answered, not really knowing what to say. A few months prior, a conservation organisation had begun to release rehabilitated orangutans in a National Park bordering Sapan, a small Ngaju Dayak settlement in Indonesian Borneo.² The release of orangutans marks the end of a long process of nurturing and training displaced or orphaned orangutans to survive in the ‘wild’. It was 2019, and Sapan still lacked running water, electricity, basic healthcare, and communications. Like Usup, most inhabitants struggled to make sense of the release and could not understand the care and the money invested in orangutans. Possibly due to overhunting in recent centuries

(Spehar et al. 2018), orangutans had virtually been absent from the surrounding forests. “Since they started releasing orangutans here,” Usup continued, “things have become sick (D: *pehe*).”³ While *pehe* (I: *sakit*) literally means to be physically sick, figuratively, it is a catch-all for people’s worries, anxieties, and frustration due to a precarious socio-economic situation. It seemed that, in the wake of the release activities, orangutans had turned from irrelevant beings into powerful actors impacting village affairs in various adverse ways.

This paper explores the relationship between orangutans and Bornean villagers by investigating the complex ways in which orangutans—although largely unseen and absent from their day-to-day lives—make their presence felt, thanks to conservation efforts. I make this ethnographic reality the starting point of my investigation to think through how notions of absence and presence operate in global orangutan conservation. Based on my investigation, I offer the figure of the orangutan as an absent agent to address two interrelated aims.

First, I take up Paul Jepson and Maan Barua’s (2015) invitation to expand their theory of flagship species action that seeks to explain how megafauna influences conservation endeavours. To mobilise moral, financial, and political

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support for their cause, organisations from the Global North strategically popularise so-called flagship species—elephants, tigers, or orangutans. This, however, has far-reaching implications for the people living alongside these species in the Global South, who often see these species quite differently (e.g., Barua et al. 2010). I argue that to people like Usup, orangutans mainly matter in the context of their relationships with conservation and state actors trying to save this species from extinction. Informed and justified by powerful ideas, tropes and imaginaries of absence that, for instance, represent forests as spaces devoid of humans, these relations risk reproducing older inequalities and power imbalances while creating new ones (cf. Brosius et al. 2005; Fletcher 2010; Dove et al. 2011). The question thus becomes, who and what are made absent and present through the work of conservation? With what implications? And through which processes?

Inspired by anthropological, sociological, and geographical work into the agency of the absence (e.g., Hetherington 2004; Bille et al. 2010; Meyer 2012; Meier et al. 2013), I propose the figure of the orangutan as an absent agent to emphasise that human-orangutan relationships manifest themselves not only in direct “contact zones” (Fuentes 2010) but also in various “contexts that mediate these relations” (Thung 2018). Following a relational approach that considers absence as “something performed, textured and materialised through relations and processes” (Meyer 2012: 107), I examine different areas of indirect human-orangutan encounter, including student expeditions, conservation research, land-use planning, and community development, to show how orangutans become present in Bornean villagers’ lives through conservation, even as they remain largely absent in other ways.

My second aim is to interrogate what the figure of the orangutan as an absent agent can bring to recent debates about the role of absence in conservation (e.g., Heise 2016; McCorristine and Adams 2020; Searle 2020a). Despite being a powerful framework infusing conservation ideology and practice, little is said about how different forms of absence play out in practical conservation encounters on the ground. What tropes and imaginaries of absence does conservation produce? How do these motivate, shape, and legitimise conservation practices, policies, and relations? And what are their on-the-ground ramifications? I argue that conservation efforts against the absence of species create, not necessarily deliberately, but through an interplay of imaginative, discursive, and material factors, other absences (i.e., those of local people and their concerns)—a process I call absencing.

I suggest that the figure of the absent agent not only sheds light on the ways in which orangutan conservation works (or not) in this context but also generates a new understanding of the agency of flagship species and reveals some of the great disparities, imbalances, and inequities within international biodiversity conservation at large. While conservation’s role in the dispossession and the marginalisation of local communities has been well documented (e.g., West et al. 2006; Sodikoff 2012; West 2016), this paper offers an analysis of how, at a particular historical juncture, charismatic megafauna that is

largely absent in situ, are made present through conservation at the expense of the affected people.

ORANGUTAN RESEARCH WITHOUT ORANGUTANS

This article builds on 28 months of ethnographic fieldwork in five Ngaju Dayak communities in Indonesia’s Province of Central Kalimantan between 2009 and 2019. While all communities have experienced efforts to protect orangutans, most of the material presented here comes from Sapan and Kakari, where I stayed for 10 months in 2013 and 2018–2019. Like Borneo’s other Dayak groups, the Ngaju traditionally practised swidden agriculture, collected and traded forest products, and engaged in fishing and hunting. Due to a government ban on burning, people in Kakari have left swiddening and nowadays earn their livelihood from small-scale gold mining and logging. Sapan’s residents, by contrast, continue to practice swidden agriculture along with small-scale gold mining, hunting, and collecting forest products. Once “surfing on waves of opportunity” (Gönnér 2011: 165), my interlocutors increasingly have to “navigate uncertainty” (Schreer 2016: 213), as their lives have been drastically affected by state-led and corporate frontier development over the past decades.

Indonesia’s resource frontiers have long been imagined as spaces of absence marked by empty, wild lands lacking ‘progress’ (I: *kemajuan*) (Tsing 2003, 2005). The country’s developmentalist ideologies that emerged after Indonesia’s independence in 1945 and consolidated under President Soeharto (1966–1998) effectively invoke notions of absence to justify capitalist extractivism. They frame large-scale development (e.g., oil palm plantations, mining, infrastructure) as crucial to ‘free’ rural people from their allegedly backward activities such as swiddening, foraging or hunting. Those engaged in such activities are portrayed as lacking in *kemajuan* and in need of guidance by the paternalistic state to turn them into productive citizens (e.g., Dove 1983; Li 1999; Eilenberg 2021). Yet, against its promise to bring *kemajuan*, frontier development has caused widespread environmental degradation, resource conflicts, erosion of customary rights, and socio-economic and political marginalisation of indigenous communities (e.g., Li 1999; Tsing 2005; Eilenberg 2021). Although well aware of the absencing processes that frontier development involves, my interlocutors’ hope for *kemajuan* seems unbroken (Schreer 2016, 2020).

It is in this fraught, dynamic space that community-conservation relations take place. Since conservation entails dilemmas similar to those arising from frontier development, local people often see it as another external actor that may potentially bring *kemajuan*, cause harm, or do both. Managing these overlapping and often competing interventions by the state, corporate, and conservation actors pose great challenges for communities, not least because “stark power imbalances” shape these interactions (Rubis and Theriault 2019: 964).

In both Kakari and Sapan, orangutan conservation measures are relatively recent. Despite differences in population

size, location, livelihoods, infrastructure development, and religious background, neither of these village communities had much interaction with orangutans. To overcome this methodological challenge, I focused on indirect encounters between humans and orangutans. I joined conservation activities (socialisations, workshops, research expeditions, etc.), conducted semi-structured interviews with villagers, conservation staff, researchers, and students, and participated in people's daily activities. It was through these informal interactions in people's homes, their fields, and the forest that I learned about their relations with orangutans and conservation more generally. Thereby, my position as a European researcher with affiliations to conservation organisations, yet also as Ngaju speaking parent with a child in the field, shaped the relationship with my interlocutors.

ORANGUTANS AS ABSENT AGENTS

Conservationists work against absence—the anticipated disappearance of plant and animal species. As life on Earth is considered to be “entering the sixth mass extinction” (Ceballos et al. 2015), conservationists seek to monitor “the boundaries between what is here, going and gone” (McCorristine and Adams 2020: 106). Along a continuum of presence and absence, the status of species is assessed and stored in international databases, the best known of which is the Red List of Threatened Species, commissioned by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The assessment of species, however, relies on incomplete data and alternative definitions of the species concept (Ceballos et al. 2015) and involves a politics of selection and representation that makes certain life forms largely invisible (e.g., insects, fungi) while glossing over the fact that species have (dis)appeared throughout Earth's history (Heise 2016; McCorristine and Adams 2020).⁴ To be sure, species loss articulated through the idea of extinction as an “existential threat to civilisation” (Ceballos et al. 2020: 13601) has become a powerful, emotive trope of the international conservation movement. In these “declensionist narratives” (Heise 2016: 7), species that have appeal to humans—tigers, elephants, or orangutans—receive disproportionate presence. Such flagship species are able to mobilise moral, financial, and political support for the cause of conservation thanks to their “nonhuman charisma” (Lorimer 2007: 915; see also Albert et al. 2018).⁵ Flagships not only work as icons of and catalysts for global biodiversity but, as victims of the extinction crisis, their fate also functions “as a synecdoche for the broader environmentalist idea of the decline of nature” (Heise 2016: 32).

While conservation organisations have long used megafauna as a marketing tool, the conservation literature began to study the idea of flagships just in the 1990s (Macdonald et al. 2015). Scholars have debated whether it is appropriate to build conservation action on single species (e.g., Linnell et al. 2000), analysed the effectiveness of flagships in different conservation settings (e.g., Kinan and Dalzell 2005), and developed an approach for flagship

selection (Verissimo et al. 2011). Yet, as Jepson and Barua (2015) have observed, the ways in which flagships act and impact conservation outcomes remain poorly understood. To fill this gap, they propose a “theory of flagship action” that affords animals an active role in shaping their environments and relationships with humans and non-human others. According to Jepson and Barua (2015), flagships are successful in generating positive conservation outcomes, if their attributes correspond with local cultural values and they become integrated and reproduced by political economies.

Jepson and Barua's (2015) approach provides a valuable attempt to outline how charismatic megafauna act and inform conservation outcomes. However, the theory is constrained by its policy orientation as well as by the fact that the given examples of flagship species action are not well embedded in the regional literature that can offer important insights into the historical, cultural and economic and political contexts in which flagship species conservation is enacted/enforced.

This paper expands the understanding of flagship action by exploring how a charismatic species shape conservation encounters on the ground despite largely being absent in situ.

As Kevin Hetherington (2004: 159) writes, “The absent can have just as much of an effect upon relations as recognisable forms of presence can have.” However, absence is not simply the “antonym to presence” (Bille et al. 2010: 18) but a sensuous, corporal, and affective phenomenon (Frers 2013) involving aspects such as lack of rights (Meier et al. 2013). Following Morgan Meyer's (2012: 107) call to “trace” the relational dynamics “through which absence becomes matter and through which absence comes to matter”, this paper asks how orangutans matter to Bornean villagers, even though they are virtually absent from their routine lives?

Orangutans effect relationships between villagers, conservationists and state actors that introduce various new phenomena in rural people's lives—be it conservationists and their activities, jobs, law enforcement, restricted resource access, conflicts, and also orangutans (through reintroduction, environmental education, and so). However, conservationists' efforts to ensure presence of orangutans are intimately connected with processes of absencing of villagers and their concerns. The ape's capacity to affect the work against absence and its processes of absencing, I argue, renders the orangutan the status of an absent agent.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ORANGUTAN CONSERVATION

There are three species of orangutans—*Pongo abelii* and *Pongo tapanuliensis* in Sumatra and *Pongo pygmaeus* in Borneo. The Red List classifies all three as Critically Endangered (Ancorenaz et al. 2016; Nowak et al. 2017; Singleton et al. 2017), as they all have undergone rapid population declines. The major factors contributing to the species' decline are forest conversion and hunting for food, which is considered to be still common in Borneo (Davis et al. 2013; Spehar et al. 2018). Orangutans also get killed when they get into conflict with humans as

a consequence of habitat fragmentation due to logging, the expansion of industrial agriculture and forestry, mining, infrastructure development, and forest fires (ibid.).

Their endangerment and appeal to humans make orangutans a popular flagship of international campaigns that effectively invoke the idea of a projected orangutan absence (i.e., their extinction) to raise awareness about broader environmental issues, such as climate change, human health, and ethical consumption. Orangutans' fate is, for instance, commonly used to alarm consumers in the Global North about the costs of palm oil, which is used in foods, cosmetics, and biofuel. Absent in anti-palm oil campaigns, however, are the voices of Indonesian smallholders, who produce a large share of the country's palm oil and often live alongside orangutan habitat. Orangutans thus work both as icons and catalysts for environmentalist ideas in general and biodiversity conservation in particular.

With their morphological and behavioural similarities to humans, orangutans evoke great affection, empathy and care (Jepson and Barua 2015) amongst (primarily) Western people. For example, they establish a great affective presence in the lives orangutan adopters from the UK and the US, who donate money in aid of individual apes to receive regular updates about their rehabilitation progress (Chua et al. 2021). These adopters displayed a photo of the adopted orangutan prominently in their home and avidly followed their condition via social media. These personal acts of presencing orangutans remind us of the ways in which people picture the absence of loved ones (Parrot 2010). Orangutans' ability to raise emotions makes them a perfect funding tool for conservation organisations (Jepson and Barua 2015), reflecting in a powerful political economy with a total annual budget of USD80 million (Fair 2021). As both Indonesian and Western conservationists agreed, "The orangutan sells." They further reasoned, however, that while "orangutans work internationally, (...) they don't work in Indonesia." (NGO official, October 2019)

The hyper-presence of orangutans in the Global North is contrasted with a general absence, i.e., the invisibility of orangutans in Indonesian society. Jepson and Barua (2015: 100) suggest that this is due to the fact that Indonesia's former political elites eschewed the ape as a national symbol, as it "evokes framings of primitive humanoids." Although orangutans and monkeys serve as "racialised figures" (Chao 2021: 1) in Indonesian popular discourse to debase people as primitive, Indonesians themselves have different ideas about the purposes of conservation.

Prevailing Indonesian discourses and policies frame biodiversity conservation as a vehicle of development. In line with an "assertive nationalism" shaping the country's politics in recent years (Aspinall 2016: 72), these discourses counter critical views of palm oil and negate the decline of orangutans by drawing on alternate scientific knowledge (Meijaard et al. 2018), while aligning orangutans with broader national concerns, particularly economic development. Biodiversity, including orangutans, is cast as "an asset and basic capital of development that shall be managed in a wise manner so that it provides benefit to the entire nation of

Indonesia" (Darajati et al. 2016: VII). Through this framing, orangutan conservation gets closely linked but subordinated to development goals (Chua et al. 2021). These views thus challenge international conservation imaginaries of imminent orangutan absence and its causes while offering alternative ideas about the purpose of orangutan conservation.

The discrepancy between such local axioms and international conservation imaginaries poses a challenge for organisations that need to meet the expectations of international donors to work against the absence of orangutans, on the one hand, and account for local realities, on the other. To make conservation work on the ground, NGO workers need to find ways of working around and beyond the orangutan.

MAKING THE ABSENT PRESENT

In Central Kalimantan, conservationists first began to identify priority landscapes for orangutan conservation in the early 2000s, which led to the creation or consolidation of conservation projects across the province.⁶ These initiatives were all based on scientific surveys, habitat mapping, and advocacy, which are crucial tools to presence orangutans. The 2004 Orangutan Population and Habitat Viability Assessment also listed Kakari as a priority region, yet just in 2010, orangutan conservationists formally surveyed parts of the area with the aim of creating a community forest to safeguard Kakari's ancestral lands from conversion to industrial plantations. The survey initiated further conservation activities. In the following years, a research forest was designated, and a camp was built to carry out conservation research. Subsequent surveys estimated that the area and the landscape beyond the harbour had one of the largest unprotected orangutan populations. While these estimates provide a compelling argument for protecting habitat, most visitors to the Kakari research forest never get to see an orangutan.

"You shouldn't come out here with the expectation to see an orangutan. If you expect that, you will definitely be disappointed. You hear them, you smell their urine, and you see their nests," Matt said after a biodiversity walk (conservation researcher, August 2018). Matt was one of the conservationists leading the 'expedition', as it was called. Indonesian and foreign students stayed for three weeks in the camp to gain hands-on experience in tropical ecology. A foreign student commented, "We are running out of time; we only have ten days left" (conservation student, August 2018). Like some others, the student seemed both disappointed and nervous that we hadn't spotted any orangutans yet, but had just seen some nests. Our guide, a young man from Kakari, had pointed them out to us—a bunch of decayed branches in the canopy. Many of the local staff and students didn't share the Westerners' affection for orangutans. Afraid, they actually hoped not to encounter the ape. There was clearly a mismatch between local views and international expectations. "At least we know they are around," the foreign student continued. "True," another one agreed. Given the orangutans' invisibility, it was as if the students had to reassure themselves about the

orangutans' presence. Although largely hidden, orangutans leave their traces across forests, plantations, gardens, and fields (Spehar et al. 2018): decaying nests, eaten or destroyed crops, damaged field huts, scratches on trees, falling branches, urine smell, and long calls attest to their presence. How, then, do you witness the presence of something largely invisible to mobilise support for its cause?

"For how much do you buy an orangutan nest?," Nurdin asked with sarcastic laughter as we talked about his view of the activities in Kakari's research forest (male elder, March 2019). Notwithstanding that his children worked in the camp, the elder seemed critical of the conservation endeavour. "We don't know what they are working there," Nurdin complained. Most residents felt to have little knowledge about the activities and their purposes. They regretted not having much interaction with foreigners. Structural issues (e.g., conservation schedules, language barriers) limited opportunities for interaction, which contributed to their feelings of being absented, i.e., of exclusion and lack of recognition as important local actors. Visitors mostly engaged with local conservation staff working as cooks, porters, guides, and research assistants. While the locals' intimate, tacit knowledge of the forest and their practical know-how were indispensable to running the conservation activities, these place-based skills usually remain unrecognised or absent in representations of orangutan conservation (cf. Rubis and Theriault 2019). Orangutan conservation tends to be depicted as a domain of positivist Western natural scientific knowledge. Since his son-in-law was involved in nest counting, I asked Nurdin, "Why are they counting orangutan nests?" Shrugging his shoulders, Nurdin replied, "I don't know."

Orangutans build a nest each night for sleeping and sometimes also during the day for resting and feeding. Counting nests along line transects across the landscape is seen as a suitable method to assess orangutan presence (Spehar et al. 2010). Nest density is converted into orangutan density using distance sampling methods, which include standardised nest-building parameters, nest degradation rates, and correction factors (ibid.). Nest surveys thus trace absent, i.e., invisible, orangutans to attest their presence. However, nest surveys are much more than a scientific methodology for assessing the density and distribution of orangutans; they also serve as powerful epistemological and ontological devices to mobilise support for conservation action. The method makes the presence of orangutans real and knowable through charts, tables, and maps representing their population size and density while glossing over their great variation, uncertainty (ibid.), and researcher subjectivity. Notwithstanding that "it all depends on who is doing the counting" (conservation research staff, July 2018) as a researcher revealed, nest surveys produce a certain orangutan reality. This reality, its discourses and representations feed into national and international advocacy and policy mechanisms like the IUCN Red List as the necessary scientific evidence to raise support for conservation measures. Thus the standard method of nest counting in orangutan conservation research has immediate and far-reaching implications for people living alongside the object of study.

LIFE WITH(OUT) ORANGUTANS

Recall that Usup bemoaned how things had become sick (D: *pehe*) since orangutans had been released close to Sapan. After habitat surveys had found that the adjacent National Park could safeguard a viable orangutan population, an organisation began to reintroduce orangutans in 2016, reaching Sapan in 2019. After a long journey of training and nurturing, a careful selection process, and final medical check-ups, pick-ups transported the release candidates from the rehabilitation centre to the village, from where boats brought them upriver to release them into 'freedom'. By the end of 2021, more than 180 rehabilitated or translocated orangutans roamed the wider area. Conservation staff based at a release camp monitored their progress, provided medical support, and took them back if necessary. However, what was "celebrated as (...) a small victory in efforts to save this critically endangered species from extinction" (Chua et al. 2021: 371) is seen quite differently by local people. My acquaintances were both worried and surprised about the release. Although conservation researchers consider the absence of orangutans in the area as the result of historical overhunting by Orang Ut (Spehar et al. 2018), the local people offered another reason for their absence. They thought that orangutans would not thrive in the surrounding forests by recounting the legend of an orangutan which roamed this forest in search of food. It climbed a spiny tree to get its fruit but suffered fatal injuries while doing so. As it was dying, the orangutan cursed the area to warn its descendants from venturing there.

"Why sick?" I asked Usup, knowing that this term refers to the socio-economic hardship, structural inequalities, and marginalisation of local people's experiences (Schreer 2016). Usup explained in detail:

"There are many ancestral village sites upriver. If there will be more and more orangutans, our fruits there will certainly be eaten. (...) The second thing is, if orangutans already know where to find food, they will always return. That makes people afraid. Usually, the women go by themselves to the swiddens, but they might no longer dare. Third, if orangutans discover a swidden, they can finish the food in our field huts and stamp the paddy down. The fourth thing is that people are no longer allowed to hunt [any forest animals]. And fifth, people can no longer mine for gold upriver because of the [conservation] patrols." (Male elder, November 2019)

By showing how orangutans came to matter to the villagers, Usup's concerns not only indicate the ways in which conservation impinges on local relations with the surrounding landscape and its non-human inhabitants but also reveal the dynamic and often uneasy relationship with orangutans.

As human-orangutan relations play out in a complex field of overlapping, shifting, and often-competing interventions by the state, corporate, and NGO actors, they vary across indigenous communities in Borneo. Even though many communities do not seem to include orangutans prominently in their oral histories and view them rather as prey (Wadley

et al. 1997; Wadley and Colfer 2004; Davies et al. 2013) or agricultural pests (Campbell-Smith et al. 2010; Davies et al. 2013), these relations are thus inevitably bound in larger-scale transformations of the landscape.⁷ While people's relationships with orangutans are in flux and differ from previous generations, nowadays, orangutans play a marginal role in everyday life of Ngaju villagers. Like other Bornean communities, my fieldwork acquaintances regard orangutans not as exceptional but as one of many nonhuman entities in a multispecies world (cf. Meijaard 2012; Thung 2018; Chua et al. 2020, 2021; Michaela Haug, pers. comm. 2022). Indeed, for most of my interlocutors, orangutans are less important than other animals, such as fish or the culturally significant hornbill (Thornton 2017). Hence, it is of little surprise that people in the area frequently questioned conservationists' funding and "sympathy for the orangutan, but not for the orang [person] Dayak" (Perez 2010: 150). Unlike other Indonesian human-primate interfaces formed through close entanglement (e.g., Fuentes 2010), Ngaju villagers' relations with orangutans have thus been marked by a general absence, i.e., the invisibility of the ape, mutual avoidance, antagonism, and fleeting encounter (cf. Chua et al. 2021).

While some elderly men boasted about having caught orangutans alive to keep them as pets or sell them on, most of my interlocutors recounted their interactions with the ape as rare, ephemeral, and scary. A neighbour, for example, told how something was vanishing in the canopy when she came to her garden the day before:

"I discovered that many fruits had been eaten and thought this must have been an orangutan. I became afraid lying down because I feared to fall asleep and, who knows, the orangutan would carry me away. I am even afraid of meeting one, especially since I am a woman." (Female resident, October 2019)

Such experiences and fears are common (cf. Campbell-Smith et al. 2010). Another resident, who worked as a cook in the release camp, recounted how she had jumped into the river to escape from an encroaching orangutan. However, more than alluding to the sexual coercion practised by male orangutans against females (Knott and Kahlenberg 2015; Parreñas 2018), such accounts reveal orangutans' intangible and unpredictable agencies (cf. Parreñas 2018; Chua et al. 2021). Here, their potency not only results in economic loss but materialises as a sensuous, corporeal, and emotional phenomenon, evoking feelings of fear (D: *kamikeh*) and unease (D: *dia tenang*). Such (in)visible effects contrast popular Western portrayals of orangutans as gentle, peaceful, and harmless animals (cf. Chua et al. 2021). Yet, as indicated by Usup, orangutans and their presencing not only matter for these intangible reasons but also because of the other presences and absences that their conservation evokes.

ABSENCING AS STRUCTURAL EFFECT

For my fieldwork acquaintances in Sapan and Kakari, orangutans manifest their presence foremost through

conservation NGOs and their activities. While organisations may encourage a sense of stewardship for orangutans by hiring villagers as staff, offering environmental education, or running community development programmes, they may simultaneously act as quasi-state actors carrying out government responsibilities (e.g., translocating orangutans, rehabilitation, release, patrolling, confiscating orangutans).⁸ These ambiguous roles, together with limited resources and competing demands from governments, business actors, donors, and villagers, create ethical, political, and practical dilemmas for conservation staff (Palmer 2020), and shape their interactions with communities.

In Sapan and Kakari, organisations brought employment, environmental education for children, and community development. Yet, their presence sometimes also caused feelings of distrust, anger, and insecurity, social disintegration, land conflicts, and livelihood impediments resulting from restricted resource access and increased law enforcement. Such complexities are commonly experienced when orangutans are released or translocated or when lands are converted to protected areas for their sake (cf. Perez 2010; Chua et al. 2021). Just as Ngaju villagers struggled to make a living after the Sebangau National Park was established to protect the world's largest orangutan population (Perez 2010; Schreer 2016), my acquaintances grappled with the implications of conservationists' efforts to save the ape from extinction.

Advertised as adventure in a secluded camp in the midst of breathtaking biodiversity with irregular connection to the outside world, the student expedition into Kakari's research forest evoked images of isolation and pristine 'nature' devoid of anthropogenic impact. Such conservation narratives not only contrast indigenous Bornean societies' views of the forest as inherently social but also differ considerably from our expedition experience. Created through the entanglements between humans and nonhuman beings, including spirits, animals, plants, and rocks (Sidu 2015; Sellato 2019), for indigenous Bornean societies, the environment is a social landscape that is imbued with histories of migration, kinship formation as well as past and present mobility (Chua 2015) and sustained through people's everyday labour.

"Do you hear the loggers?" Matt asked me as we rested for a while during one of our exercises. I nodded. The noise of chainsaws penetrated the forest. "They are really close," Matt sighed. The logging came even closer. A camera trap, installed to monitor orangutans and other wildlife, witnessed the human presence. The camera had recorded a female orangutan with her infant and teenager. However, shortly thereafter, the display showed the trees in the same area being felled. Some villagers 'worked logs' (D: *mambatang*), i.e., commercial logging. Whereas my conservation interlocutors worried about the shrinking orangutan habitat, residents worried about the conservation activities. Hunting, mining, and logging were major livelihood activities but were all prohibited within the research forest. "There are many cameras. We are not allowed to work logs, mine, or hunt. All animals are protected.

Even insects, we are not allowed to disturb,” said a resident, summarising people’s concerns (Female resident, July 2018).

Logging exacerbated the land disputes between local people and the management of Kakari forest that had arisen even before the orangutan conservation activities arrived. Officials had demarcated the site’s location in a remote government office without consulting people from nearby villages. In the resulting state documents, the villagers and their histories of engagement with the area remained absent, a structural effect of complicated land-use planning processes and a legal framework that classified people’s logging as illegal. Residents, however, challenged the absencing of their presence and rights by the state by referring to customary law (I: *adat*) to make their territorial claims and contest the protection of the Kakari forest. Presences and absences are negotiated and contested (Meier et al. 2013) due to the existence of competing legal systems, confusing jurisdictions and poor land-use planning processes (e.g., Galudra et al. 2010; Sanders et al. 2019), which frequently obscure the presence of indigenous Bornean societies and gloss over their intimate relationships with the surrounding landscape.⁹

Recall how Usup worried that local people could no longer hunt and mine since orangutans had been released and that orangutans might raid crops at people’s swiddens (D: *tana*) and ancestral village sites (D: *kaleka*) that extended beyond the release area. Far from ‘naturally wild’ (I: *alami liar*), as conservation staff claimed, rehabilitated orangutans had destroyed farms, raided crops and damaged field huts in neighbouring villages, and even entered these premises in search of food. The presencing of orangutans caused material loss for the affected people and raised disputes regarding compensation (cf. Chua et al. 2021). Given the money and care invested in orangutans, my field acquaintances considered them not as ‘wild animals’ (I: *hewan liar*) but as kept and thus owned by the rehabilitation centre, and, accordingly, held the latter accountable for their loss. This view of non-human agency, rights, ownership, and responsibility contradicted the conservation and government imaginaries of ‘naturally wild’ orangutans living within the exclusive boundaries of a National Park.

The conservation and government imaginaries and practices of human absencing, also fail to acknowledge the presencing of ‘other’ humans, when research stations and release camps are established and conservation staff carry out patrolling and post-release monitoring of orangutans. These dual processes of absencing and presencing of both local villages and conservation staff thus raise thorny political questions about whose presence and rights are recognised in (orangutan) conservation, who/what is made absent through its interventions, and who or what benefits from these processes.

EXCHANGING ABSENCES, OR THE ABSENCE OF EXCHANGE

Local people often asked what benefit they would get from the conservation activities. They expected something in return

for hosting the ‘outsiders’ (and ‘their’ orangutans). From their perspective, protecting orangutans is a question of reciprocity, which is a fundamental underlying principle of socio-economic relations in Bornean societies (Dove 2011). That is, the trajectories of conservation projects largely depend on whether organisations succeed in responding to people’s expectations and needs (Myers and Muhajir 2015; Chua et al. 2021).

Organisations increasingly recognise that orangutan conservation can only be achieved by taking into account the well-being of local people (Ancrenaz et al. 2007) and carrying out human-centred activities, such as outreach programmes to mitigate human-orangutan conflicts, linking health provision to habitat protection, education programmes to foster environmental awareness, and development projects to create jobs, sustainable livelihoods, and infrastructure (Chua et al. 2020). Although especially community development does not specifically focus on orangutans, the ape acts as a moral, financial, and political catalyst to secure funding and get support from government bodies. However, as Rubis and Theriault (2019: 966-967) aptly point out in reference to other works (e.g., West 2006, 2016; Heatherington 2010; Sodikoff 2012), even well-intended ‘community-based’ or ‘human-centred’ conservation interventions can have detrimental effects for local people, not necessarily through direct displacement but their efforts to install land and labour regimes that imply bureaucratic hierarchies and objectify the environment. Besides facing structural issues, including a lack of financial and human capacities and short-termism, such projects suffer from discrepancies between international conservation concepts and local understandings of the modalities of their relationship (West 2006; Oakley 2020). Thus, although orangutans remain largely absent in these interactions, conservation community development efforts become a space for negotiating questions of legitimacy, rights, and benefit-sharing that the ape’s protection entails.

Similar to government imaginaries of absence and their practices of absencing, community-focused activities create new presences while trying to erase others. If local people, for instance, engage in seemingly destructive activities (mining, logging, hunting, or swiddening), and show little interest in or oppose conservation schemes, organisations may attribute this to an absence of environmental awareness. As a remedy, they initiate education programmes and develop sustainable livelihoods to change people’s behaviour and foster conservation-oriented ‘mindsets’ (I: *pola pikir*). Although communities usually cooperate to some extent to “access desired resources” (Rubis and Theriault 2019: 964), turning villagers into environmental subjects is difficult (e.g., Cepek 2011). Especially local conservation workers often grapple with their complex positionalities. To navigate their conflicting loyalties, they downplay or hide people’s (and sometimes their own) involvement in contested activities. A person hired to follow orangutans, for instance, told how he struggled with the food at camp due to the hunting prohibitions: “Eating there is difficult. But, once, I caught a pangolin and served it to the NGO people. ‘This was pangolin,’ I told them

afterwards. ‘If you like to report me, remember that you ate it, too’” (Male resident, November 2019). Hence, to manage their relationship with organisations and the dilemmas that this involves, community members deliberately hide facets of their lives to keep some independence while trying to derive benefits amidst unequal power relations (also see Rubis and Theriault 2019: 964).

Reminiscent of Indonesia’s development discourse and its tropes of absence (Schreer 2016), conservation workers frequently style themselves as mere ‘facilitators’ (I: *fasilitator*). In exchange for supporting communities to overcome their assumed shortcomings, organisations hope that people will ‘care more’ (I: *lebih peduli*) about orangutans, the forest, and the environment. The facilitator role, however, glosses over the ways in which NGOs intervene in local worlds while claiming to pave “the way for a graceful project exit” (Perez 2010: 157). This approach contrasts with local expectations. In exchange for their hospitality, engagement and concession, people seek long-lasting relationships of reciprocity, bringing facilities, education, and jobs, i.e., *kemajuan*. As one community leader expressed: “We hope that your presence will help us to improve (I: *maju*), that there are benefits for people, that you build infrastructure and our children can work in your organisation. We help each other, right?” (Male resident, January 2019)

While such hopes invoke “strategic dependency” (Oakley 2020: 250) as a form of indigenous political agency to negotiate relationships with powerful conservation outsiders, they do not correspond with the standard procedures of conservation projects; exit is built in from the start (Perez 2010). When community development staff introduced their programme in Sapan, they deliberately called their activities ‘seed capital’ (I: *modal awal*) to avoid expectations for any long-term commitment. Their activities were meant to show the residents that the organisation “does not only care about orangutans,” (Conservation staff, November 2019). The staff and villagers were aware that neither the planned fish breeding nor the distribution of tree seedlings could compensate for the restricted resource access, increased patrolling and law enforcement resulting from the orangutan release. “How long does the programme run?” I asked. “Four months,” the staff explained, quickly adding that the funding would possibly be extended. The villagers looked disappointed; their hopes for socio-economic betterment would certainly not materialise. And their question—how orangutan conservation benefits locals—remains to be answered.

CONCLUSION: ABSENCE BEYOND SPECIES

Scholars have explored multiple ways in which absences make their presence felt by emphasising the elusive nature of absences evoked by hauntings and spectrality (e.g., Hetherington and Degen 2001; Maddern and Adey 2008). Others have foregrounded their embodied, emotional, and experiential dimensions (e.g., Parrott 2010; Frers 2013) and shown how, through decay and ruin, absences manifest themselves across landscapes (e.g., Edensor 2005; Gibas

2013). Still, others have explored how absences emerge from processes of contestation and negotiation to highlight their relational and political charge (Meyer 2012; contributors to Meier et al. 2013). Following this latter body of work, I have put forward the figure of the absent agent to encapsulate the messy, often unseen processes through which orangutans inform conservation encounters on the ground in Borneo. Thanks to their charisma, orangutans largely come (in)to matter by effecting and affecting a relationship between villagers, conservationists and state actors. As I have shown, this relationship causes various new presences and absences that risk reproducing older disparities, imbalances, and inequities while creating new ones. For my field acquaintances, the presencing of orangutans materialises as a political project with far-reaching implications in terms of rights, legitimacy, (in)justice, and benefit-sharing. The largely invisible orangutan acts as the absent agent, the catalyst behind these processes. By disclosing the power dynamics involved in flagship protection, the absent agent reveals that, structurally, conservation is often not separate from other forces of dispossession. As a productive conceptual lens to shed light on the various ways in which flagship species influence conservation efforts on the ground and lay bare their effects, it offers broader analytical implications beyond this ethnographic case.

Tropes of loss, decline and extinction serve as powerful frames for conservation thought and action—whether in the form of international regimes to ban the trade of endangered species like orangutans (e.g., Nijman 2017), hunting of “ghost species” (Heise 2016: 38; see also Knight 1997; van Dooren 2014b), scientific surveys and expeditions (e.g., Jørgensen 2016; McCorristine and Adams 2020), or efforts to halt or even reverse extinction (e.g., van Dooren 2014a; Searle 2020b), in the case of orangutans through rehabilitation and reintroduction (Parreñas 2018; Palmer 2020). All these works give important insights into how species absence—that “what is not anymore and what is not yet, what may never be and what never has been” (Searle 2020a: 167; emphasis in original.)—moves conservation in both an ideological and practical sense. However, as I have demonstrated, questions of species’ absence inevitably raise questions about the absence and presence of humans.

Efforts to mitigate the disappearance of flagships like the orangutan produce other absences, such as the views, the rights and the concerns of my Bornean acquaintances, perhaps not deliberately, but through the combination of mutually reinforcing imaginative, discursive, and material processes and actions that I have called absencing. International campaigns leave little room for local concerns and expertise; government and conservation imaginaries represent forests devoid of humans; land-use planning and conservation management processes cause dispossession and discrepancies between international conservation concepts and local understandings; community-conservation work tries to overcome villagers’ alleged lack of awareness, and project procedures often hinder conservation staff to respond to local expectations and needs adequately.

Taken together, these practices of absencing raise the uneasy and highly political question of whose absence comes to matter, and how—both in conservation and scholarship. Against conservation's purported apolitical claims, the concept of the absent agent moves us to look beyond species in the practical and the analytical sense: to attend to the politically complex, often invisible dynamics through which flagship species operate on the ground and lay bare how efforts to mitigate their disappearance are intimately tied up with the absencing of certain humans. More than revealing injustices, inequalities, and power imbalances, thinking absence beyond species offers a different way of considering how to ensure the presence of both orangutans and local people.

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I have no conflict of interest to disclose in the conduct of this research.

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Data Availability

The data presented in the manuscript is not accessible due to privacy restrictions.

NOTES

- 1 All names in this article are pseudonyms. The conversation with Usup, a male elder, took place in November 2019.
- 2 Together with other Dayak groups and the (formerly) nomadic Punan, the Ngaju are native to Borneo and the dominant ethnic group in Central Kalimantan Province.

- 3 Terms in Ngaju Dayak are marked with a 'D'; terms in the national language Bahasa Indonesia with an 'I'.
- 4 With 1,38,374 species assessed (IUCN 2021), the Red List covers only a small percentage of all 2,008,947 species identified so far (Catalogue of Life 2021), not to mention that the total number of species inhabiting the Earth remains unknown.
- 5 In addition to particular traits (dangerous, impressive, cute, rare, and beautiful), the level of endangerment determines a species' charisma (Albert et al. 2018).
- 6 In 2004, the Sebangau National Park was designated; the Lamandau reserve became the site of an orangutan reintroduction project, and a new orangutan conservation project was initiated in Belantikan.
- 7 Some indigenous Iban communities tell how orangutans taught their ancestors to deliver babies safely which serves as a taboo against killing orangutans (Sidu et al. 2015; Yuliani et al. 2018). June Rubis (2020: 824) however cautions against reconfiguring these stories into a "moralistic fable" for conservation purposes, arguing that Iban's ways of relating to the maia (orangutan) rather resemble a mode of "relational care" (Rubis 2020: 813) marked by mutual obligations.
- 8 There is growing awareness that orangutans cannot be protected without addressing the underlying social, economic, and political dimensions of habitat loss and orangutan killing (Spehar et al. 2018).
- 9 In 2017, 63% of Indonesia's landmass was designated as 'forest estate' (I: *kawasan hutan*) (MoEF 2018). This assessment, however, rarely conforms to the physical reality on the ground. Often, 'forests' are settled or degraded, while lands classified as 'other land-use area' (I: *areal penggunaan lain*) are forested.

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