

RED APE ENCOUNTERS: HOW WALKING WITH WILD ORANG-UTANS REALLY BENEFIT COMMUNITIES

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Reconciling local communities and wildlife is a priority in areas where human and animals share the same habitat. The forests of the Lower Kinabatangan floodplain (Sabah, Malaysia) are highly degraded and fragmented following decades of timber exploitation and other extractive uses by local communities. This degradation is resulting in a shortage of basic natural supplies, in the emergence of wildlife conflicts and in a strong resistance to protect the newly created Wildlife Sanctuary that is perceived as a way to lock up the last available natural resources. In 2001, the Sabah Wildlife Department, the “Kinabatangan Orang-utan Conservation Project” and the local community of Sukau launched “Red Ape Encounters”, a community-owned tourist company aiming at integrating habitat and wildlife conservation with the socioeconomic development of the local communities. Over the years, RAE has developed its own “Tourism Management Guidelines” in order to minimize animal disturbance, habitat degradation as well as the risks of disease transmission between tourists and wild habituated orang-utans. This communication presents how RAE was developed and what results have been achieved in 8 years of existence. It also discusses the strengths and weaknesses of community-based eco-tourism activities.

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