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Great Ape Trust spotlight:

Caretaker demonstrates great commitment to orangutan survival, habitat conservation

Des Moines, Iowa – June 26, 2007 – Imagine the Rose Bowl Stadium in Pasadena, half full on the biggest football day of the year. Now, imagine that instead of human beings, orangutans have filed through the turnstiles for a seat in the stands. The point? If every orangutan remaining in the rainforests of Borneo and Sumatra, the only places on Earth where those great apes are found in the wild, were brought to the stadium, they'd fill only about half of its 100,000 seats.

It's a vivid mind picture that Andy Antilla, a senior orangutan caretaker at Great Ape Trust of Iowa, calls up time and again. He'd like for an artist to turn it into a poster, a painting, a computer rendering – anything to emotionally connect human beings to the peril the tree-dwelling apes face in Indonesia and Malaysia, which are losing millions of acres of forest a year to illegal loggers, according to a new report from the U.N. Environment Program. The UNEP said earlier this month that 98 percent of Indonesia's lowland forests will be gone by 2022, putting species like the orangutan at risk of extinction. Current [estimates](#) put the number of orangutans remaining in the wild at fewer than 60,000 individuals. This represents an 80 percent to 90 percent decline in the orangutan population since the early 1900s.

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Antilla takes their plight very personally. He witnessed the crisis in 1999 when, as a zookeeper with the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, he had the opportunity to assist the Wanariset Orangutan Reintroduction Project in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, for six months. More than 250 young orangutans – individuals who would normally stay with their mothers for at least six or seven years – had been orphaned by forest fires, habitat destruction, the pet trade and other encroachments by humankind.

The experience had a profound effect on Antilla. He's returned to Borneo twice, for a month each in 2001 and 2004. In many respects, his heart, if not his conscience, remains with the two islands' imperiled orangutans.

"It solidified my desire to do all that I could to help conserve orangutans," he said.

Before he left for Borneo, Antilla's mentor at the zoo in Seattle suggested that while he was there, he would be too busy to think about the gravity of the situation to understand that he could never separate himself from the experience.

The mentor wasn't wrong. After returning to the United States, he turned his passion into volunteer work for [The Orangutan Conservancy](#), formerly the Balikpapan Orangutan Society-USA, an independent U.S. non-profit organization formed to support orangutan conservation and raise awareness of the plight of the rapidly disappearing great apes. Antilla continues to lend his energy to the cause through such efforts as the Great Ape Trust's 2nd Annual [Bowlathon](#) for Great Apes, a July 28 fund-raiser that will support conservation efforts for great apes in the wild. He also oversees cell-phone and inkjet recycling programs. One hundred percent of the proceeds from those fund-raisers go to conservation efforts.

"It's such a huge, complex problem," Antilla said. "I wish more people understood the gravity of the situation in Borneo and Sumatra, and the fact that there are so few orangutans, or any great ape species, left."

In his work with the Wanariset Orangutan Reintroduction Project, Antilla became acquainted with [Dr. Rob Shumaker](#), now the director of orangutan research at Great Ape Trust of Iowa, but at the time the coordinator of the orangutan language project at the Smithsonian Institution National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C. Both also served on the BOS-USA board.

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When Shumaker began putting together the staff for the orangutan research program at Great Ape Trust in 2004, he immediately thought of Antilla, the young man's deep passion for orangutans, his talent for managing small details that make big differences in the apes' lives, and his commitment to conservation.

"We are very fortunate here that we were able to hand-pick some of the best people working with orangutans and great apes in general," Shumaker said. "I knew Andy and his personality and philosophy; he's very laid-back, very easygoing and he gets along well with people and apes. You don't have to be around Andy long to know he just loves orangutans."

Unwavering dedication to the welfare of animals would be important at any scientific research center, but is especially crucial at start-up organizations such as Great Ape Trust.

"Orangutans and Andy are a perfect fit, and we needed very talented and absolutely dedicated people to set the right course," Shumaker said. "We wanted to make sure we started out with the kind of personality we were looking for long-term, because the nuances of care, how the facility functions and personalities are passed on from one employee to the next. Andy really helped us to establish a very positive trend for the style of care we have for our apes."

Never was that illustrated more clearly than in the caretaker's eagerness for The Trust to provide a home for Allie, an adolescent orangutan who suffered a debilitating neurological event at the Denver Zoo that left her almost completely paralyzed. Zoo officials in Denver thought The Trust would provide an ideal atmosphere for her rehabilitation and recovery.

"It was a big decision for us and it was going to require a lot of investment from us," Shumaker said. "We expected it to be hard, at least initially, and it was. We needed to all agree, and when I asked, 'What do you all think?' Andy's response was instant: 'Absolutely, let's give her a chance.'

"His attitude was, 'It's the right thing to do; let's do it,' even if it created more work for him, which initially it did," Shumaker continued. "It's a great example of what he is like."

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Though Des Moines and Seattle are miles apart geographically and culturally, it wasn't hard for Shumaker to convince Antilla to make the move to Iowa. The two had complementary philosophies about orangutan care, shared an understanding of the apes' intelligence and abilities, and agreed on the gravity of the threats to orangutans in the wild. But it was the riverine forest that flanks the orangutan building that clinched the deal. An [orangutan yard](#) currently under construction will give the tree-dwelling apes more choices about where they spend their time, and future build-outs may expand their freedom of movement even more.

"The thing that brought me here – the research obviously is very interesting – but the night I saw the forest, I thought, 'OK, I want to work here,'" Antilla said. "To think that they could possibly be out there and have more space than they normally have – these are the things you always want for orangutans."

He also shared the values and ethics regarding ape care that are epitomized at The Trust. "Apes are always first here," Antilla said. "They are not here to entertain; they are here to teach people how intelligent they are and the need to preserve them."

The intelligence of orangutans is what initially attracted Antilla to make involvement with that species his life's work, though the turn in his career was something of a surprise even to him. As a youth, his passion had been marine mammals. Later, while taking an animal psychology/behavior class as part of his study of zoology at the University of Washington, he had a chance to intern in the Woodland Park Zoo's primate exhibit. Orangutans were housed in a temporary enclosure while new facilities were being constructed and because of that, Antilla wasn't interested in working with them. His preference was to work with gorillas in a new enclosure.

Once he was introduced to orangutans, though, Antilla said he "got completely hooked by their intelligence and their poise."

"Orangutans get a bad rap that they're lazy," he said, citing some early Western research that falsely characterized them as slow-moving and unintelligent, "but they're always thinking, always looking at things, always processing and always planning what they're doing."

Antilla worked in a half dozen positions, from docent to intern and through the ranks to zookeeper before he left the zoo in Seattle to take the job at Great Ape Trust.

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By the time he arrived at the southeast Des Moines campus and began assisting Shumaker in designing and “furnishing” the orangutan building with fixtures like used fire hoses he’d collected from fire departments across Iowa to simulate vines, orangutans were “under my skin,” Antilla said.

“It was the longest period of time I hadn’t been around apes,” he said of the interim between taking the job in May 2004 and the orangutans’ arrival that September. “It was odd for me.”

GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). To learn more about Great Ape Trust of Iowa, go to www.GreatApeTrust.org.

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Insights through collaborations with apes