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## Two Great Ape Trust scientists visiting orangutans in Sumatra

*Memorandum of understanding also in the works with Indonesian university*

Des Moines, Iowa – January 14, 2008 – Two Great Ape Trust of Iowa scientists will travel to the Indonesian island of Sumatra later this month to spend time at the Ketambe Research Center, an orangutan field study site supported by the world-class scientific research center in southeast Des Moines, the [Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme](#) and several other parties.

Scientist [Dr. Serge Wich](#) and Director of Orangutan Research [Dr. Rob Shumaker](#) will spend most of their two-week trip at the Ketambe Research Center located in the province of Aceh, where about three-fourths of Sumatra's remaining 6,700 wild orangutans are found. While in Indonesia, the scientists also will work to finalize a memorandum of understanding between Great Ape Trust and *Universitas Indonesia* in Jakarta.

The Indonesian government stimulates MOUs between Indonesian institutions and foreign ones before foreign students can become involved in research in that country to encourage exchange of expertise, but it is an important development in other respects as well, Shumaker said. It strengthens The Trust's ties with partnering

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education institutions such as Iowa State University, Drake University, Simpson College and others because it creates opportunities for field research for undergraduate and graduate students.

“The issues we are collectively interested in require this kind of collaboration,” Shumaker said. “We can be far more effective in reaching our goals through partnerships than going in alone.”

The process U.S. students must go through to study in Indonesia takes time, but is worth the effort for all parties, according to Shumaker. “It’s very important for us to take this opportunity to learn about potential opportunities for students, those in the U.S. and those in Indonesia,” he said. “The more we do with students, the more we have an obligation to find opportunities for them to grow professionally.”

The Ketambe Research Center is one of the longest-running orangutan field study sites in the world. Data have been collected there since 1971, and such longitudinal studies are important in reversing the trend for the critically endangered Sumatran orangutan (*Pongo abelii*). Only an estimated 6,700 Sumatran orangutans – 900 fewer than the last official [estimate](#) of the World Conservation Union – remain in the wild, and there are fears that they could become the first great ape to become extinct in modern times.

Wich has spent much of his scientific career in Sumatra, and has worked extensively at the Ketambe Research Center, where he supervises two graduate students pursuing their doctorate degrees from Utrecht University in the Netherlands, where Wich was formerly affiliated. Wich returns to the field site about twice a year to continue his scientific work. One of the primary studies he is involved with, funded in part by the Sumatran Orangutan Conservancy Programme, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Great Ape Trust, involves how orangutans react to selective logging and how much deforestation they can endure.

By studying the effect logging has had on the area, scientists can learn a great deal about how orangutans adapt to changes in their habitat. Vast sections of rain forest have been cleared to make way for palm oil plantations, and deforestation is one of the principal threats to orangutan survival.

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Though he has done research in Borneo, the only other place in the world where orangutans remain in the wild, this is Shumaker's first trip to Sumatra. "It's a phenomenal opportunity to extend my understanding and awareness of orangutans and the issues facing orangutans," he said. "It will give me more credibility when I talk to other people about conservation of orangutans and caring for orangutans to at least have been there, even for a short period of time."

There is no guarantee the two scientists will see wild orangutans on this trip, but Shumaker said experiencing their native habitat should give him additional insight to apply when developing locomotion studies and designing facilities at Great Ape Trust.

## ***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](http://www.GreatApeTrust.org).

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Insights Through Collaborations with Apes