



THE GLOBAL LIVES OF THE ORANGUTAN: ORANGUTAN ADOPTION RESEARCH

International Animal Rescue Adopters
Dr Hannah Fair, Brunel University
December 2019

Refiguring conservation in/for 'the Anthropocene': the global lives of the orangutan (GLO) is a five-year research project (Jan 2018-Dec 2022) funded by the European Research Council (Starting Grant no. 758494). It is led by Dr Liana Chua (Principal Investigator), Reader in Anthropology at Brunel University London. It is comprised of four main studies including one of orangutan virtual adoption led by Dr Hannah Fair, a postdoctoral researcher at Brunel University.

Working in partnership with International Animal Rescue (IAR) and Orangutan Foundation (OF) Hannah Fair is conducting an ethnography of virtual orangutan 'adoption' schemes run mainly by charities in the global North, through which rescue and rehabilitation centres in Borneo and Sumatra obtain financial backing and raise awareness about the plight of orangutan. She examines how notions of kinship, relatedness, intimacy and care are negotiated in this field, and ask how they shape and are shaped by mounting public awareness about extinction, environmental crisis, interspecies ethics and 'the Anthropocene'.

<https://globallivesoftheorangutan.org> @GLO_ERC @hanthropocene



THE GLOBAL LIVES OF THE ORANGUTAN

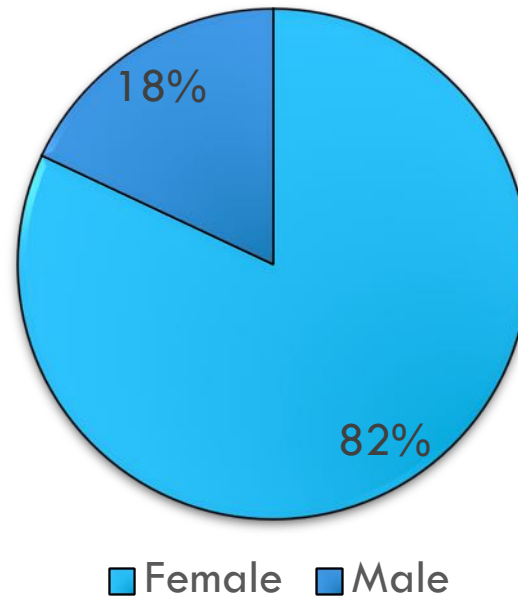
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adopters are attracted to orangutans as a species due to a wide range of factors, including their evolutionary proximity to humans, the tangible and immediate threats they face to their habitats, and their cute appearances. Supporters are motivated to adopt largely in response to emotionally powerful stories on social media, media coverage of IAR's work or as part of their ongoing enthusiasm for virtual wildlife adoption, in the form of 'menagerie adoption'. Interviewees largely first encountered IAR through social media or other forms of online content or via the documentary *Red Ape*, although some found the charity while actively researching adoption options. Supporters appreciate IAR for the wide range of animals they support and the practical on-the-ground work they do. Many adopters support a range of domestic animal and international conservation charities: consequently many have a broad interest in IAR's work, and are not solely focused on orangutans. Adoption provides supporters a chance to develop an ongoing sense of connection and responsibility towards a particular orangutan, that is bolstered by receiving regular updates. Giving or receiving an adoption is also used to help build awareness about orangutan conservation among relatives and as a rejection of unnecessary consumerism. Many adopters are passionately concerned about palm oil and seek to avoid it. IAR has the potential to engage its current orangutan adopters in the wider work it does.

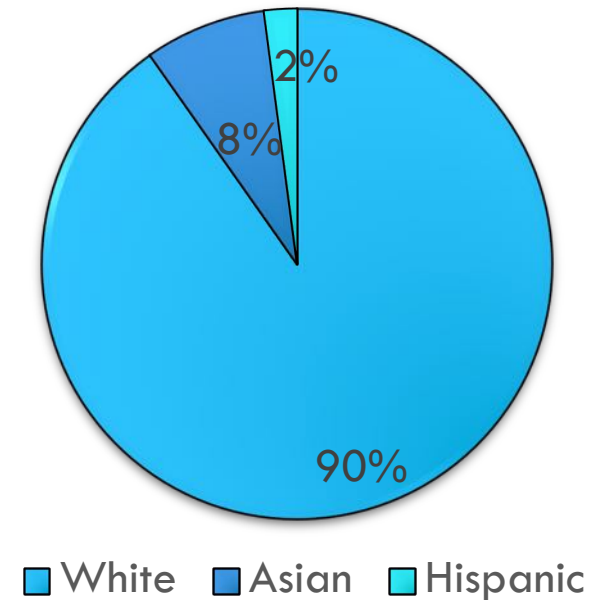
WHO WERE THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS?

Qualitative telephone interviews were conducted with 36 adopters, as well as three in person interviews, ranging in length from 20 to 67 minutes. Adopters were recruited via an advert for the study in their adoption update.

Interviewee Gender



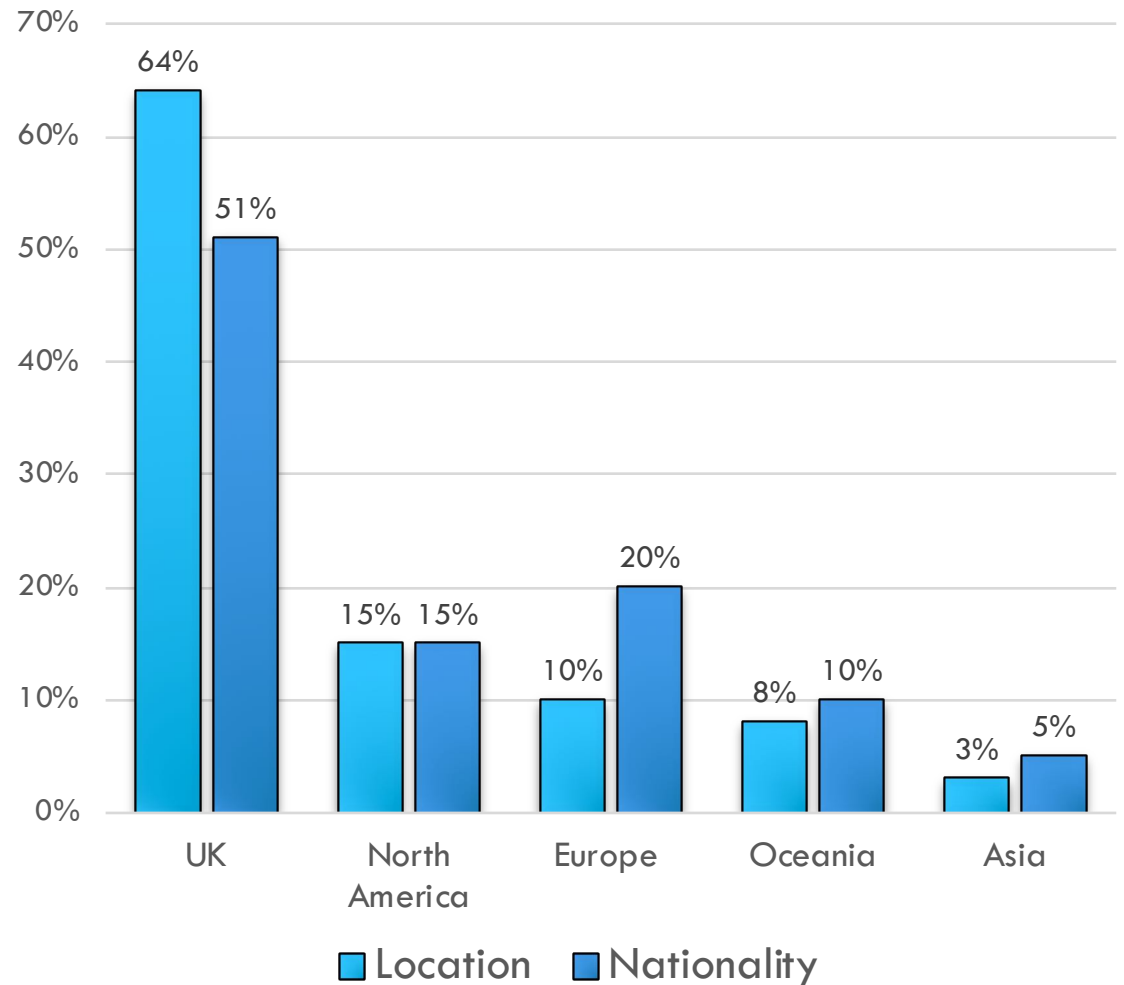
Interviewee Ethnicity



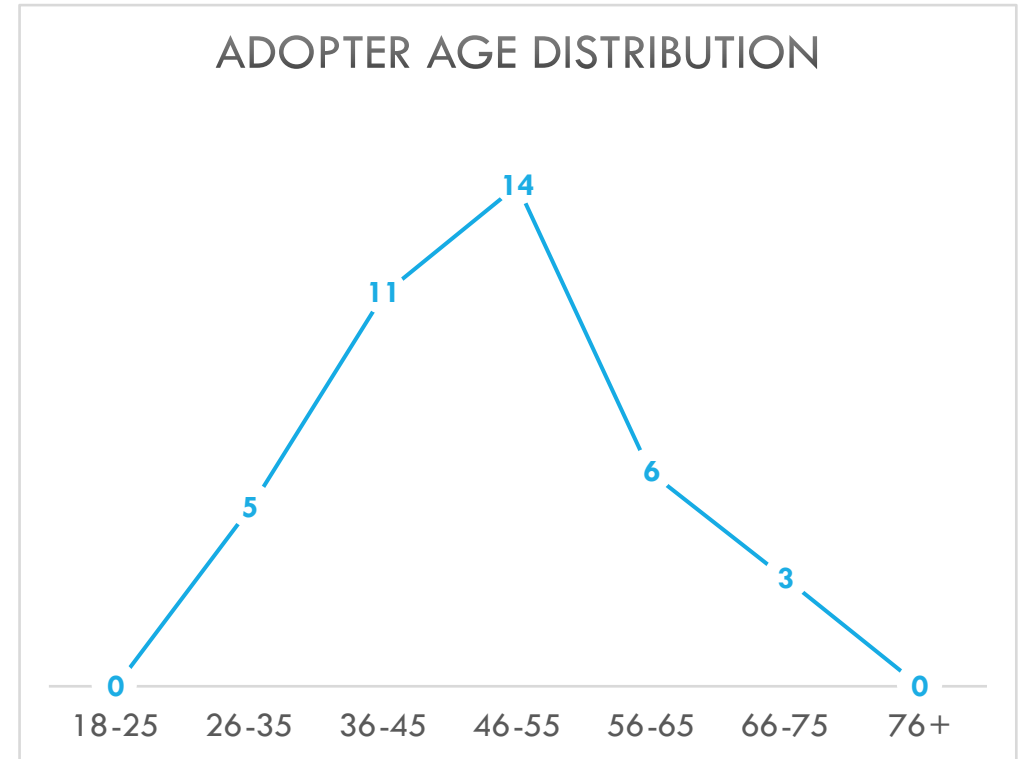
WHO WERE THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS?

While the majority of interviewees (35/ 59) were UK citizens, almost all of whom were based in the UK, there were also significant numbers of adopters from Europe and North America, reflecting IAR's global supporter base. Amongst the UK-based adopters there was a significant number of European nationals (as indicated by the distinctions between nationality and location in the chart).

Interviewee Location & Nationality
(by continent)



The age distribution follows a neat bell curve, suggesting that individuals aged 36-55 represent the major age demographic

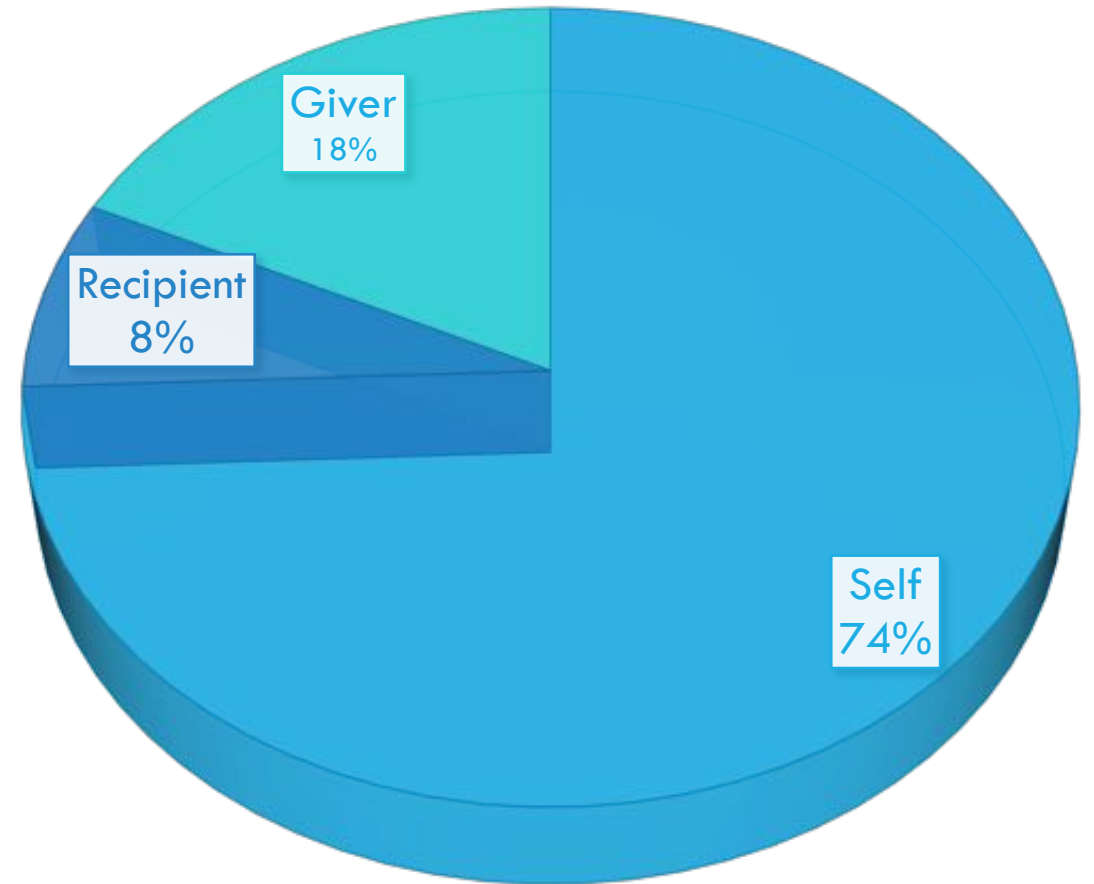


RESEARCH PARTICIPANT AGE

GIFT VERSUS SELF ADOPTIONS

74% of adopters interviewed had adopted for themselves. However in comparison with my other case study this seems disproportionately high and suggests a selection bias in terms of self adopters being more keen to participate in the research. While only 10 interviewees had given or received their IAR orangutan, 56% had given or received some form of virtual animal adoption, suggesting this research can still speak more broadly to motivations for gift adoption.

SELF ADOPTIONS VERSUS GIFT ADOPTIONS



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The most popular charities among IAR adopters were Greenpeace and WWF (both 23%), the RSPCA/ ASPCA (18%), and then Born Free and Animals Asia (13%).

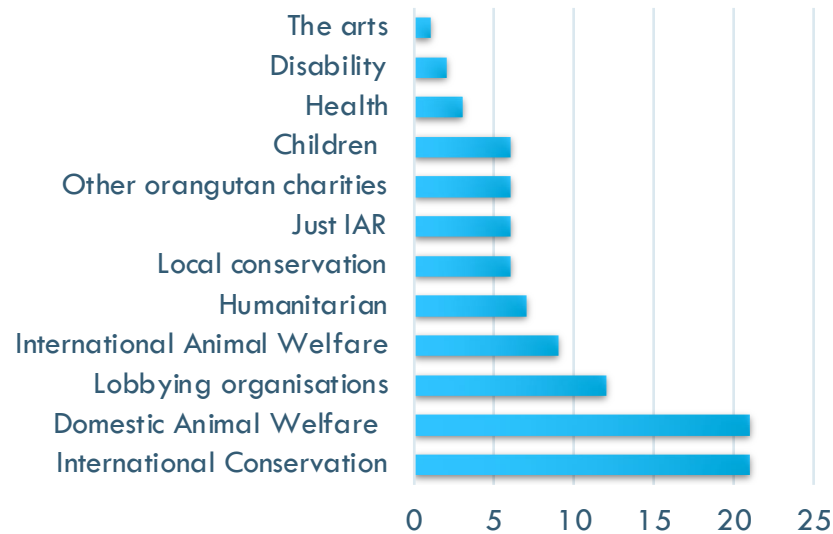
However, 15% of interviewees solely supported IAR, suggesting that IAR is reaching people beyond the pool of established charitable givers.

Of those adopters who also donate to other organisations, the overwhelming majority also give to other animal or conservation focused charities. Only one adopter otherwise exclusively supported humanitarian causes. This suggests, unsurprisingly, that the majority of IAR's supporter base are 'animal people' (and many strongly self-identified as such). However around 38% holistically balance supporting conservation alongside other causes.



WHAT OTHER CHARITIES DO ADOPTERS SUPPORT?

Other categories of charities supported



The most popular categories of charities were international conservation and domestic animal welfare, suggesting firstly that adopters do not have an exclusive commitment to orangutans, and secondly that IAR should continue to strike a balance between conservation and welfare-based messaging to most fully engage their supporters. This also suggests that current orangutan adopters are likely to be interested in the different strands of IAR's work.

Some supporters were explicit about their decision to exclusively support animal charities.

I sometimes feel that they're the forgotten ones... children's charities tend to be at the forefront a lot. So I always feel that I need to support the animal charities. I mean, obviously, I just love all types of animals anyway, and I just feel that they need as much support as they can get, particularly, now with so many endangered species across the world as well. (Interview 31)

WHY DO PEOPLE CARE ABOUT ORANGUTANS?

Orangutans generate significant concern due to an intersection of multiple factors:

- Their genetic, evolutionary and behavioural proximity to humans, rendering them easy to project human characteristics onto and thereby empathise with, but also making their suffering more morally unpalatable than less human-like creatures. While this is generally true for Great Apes, orangutans are perceived to be a more gentle species than gorillas or chimps.
- The clear connections that can be drawn between human action, deforestation and population loss, creating an easy narrative of responsibility.

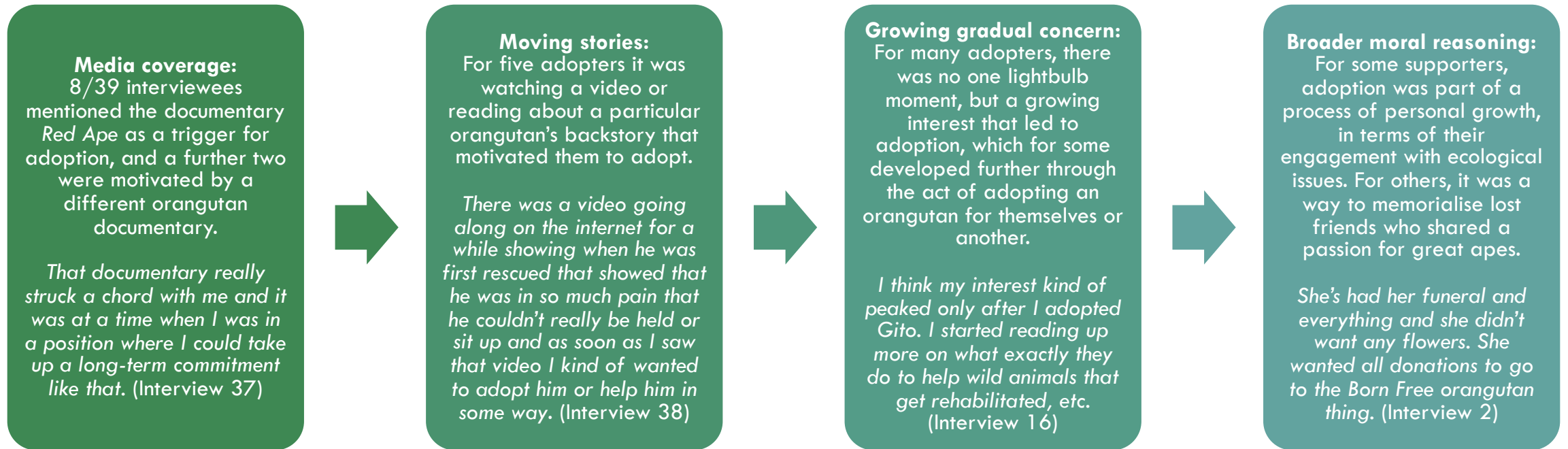


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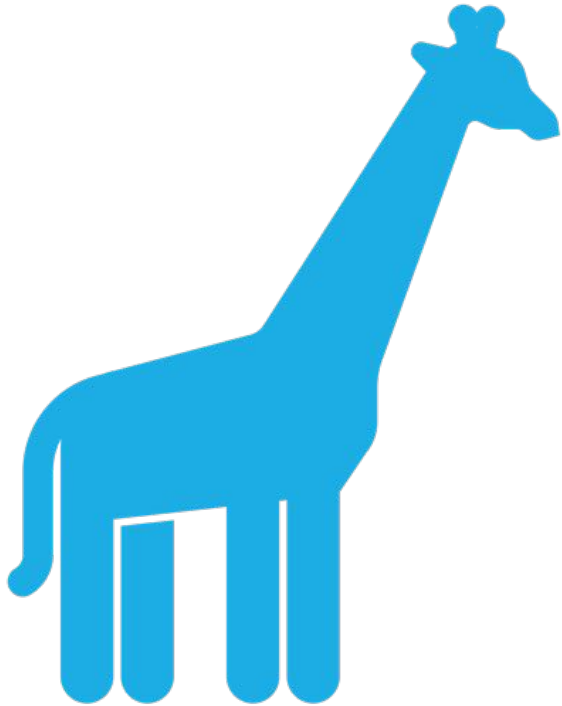
- The urgency of action needed to protect them, emerging from their vulnerability to human actions combined with the speed and scale of habitat loss.
- Their positive attributes – aside from the threats they face – such as their intelligence, their interesting behaviours and their distinct personalities.
- Their cuteness, which was emphasized by 14 of the interviewees. For most adopters, their interest in orangutans emerges through a combination of these different factors.





WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TRIGGERS FOR ADOPTION?

MENAGERIE ADOPTION



30% of those interviewed classify as what I have termed 'menagerie adopters'. They are amassing a diverse collection of virtually adopted animals (largely for themselves, but sometimes as gifts) and orangutans form one piece of this set. This suggests the potential for encouraging support for IAR's other species of concern.

They are gorillas, elephant, tigers, Amur leopard and what else? Polar bears, rhino, a black rhino. I have quite a collection. Because I have already adopted Gito I didn't think I'd need to do another orangutan. You wanna spread it evenly, yeah I mean I love all animals. (Interview 5)

However 28% of interviewees had adopted more than one orangutan, either for themselves or others, in five cases from other orangutan charities. 10% had also sponsored a child, and for some there were direct parallels between these processes.

The process is exactly the same, I wouldn't differentiate between that human sponsorship and an animal one. I think they work on exactly the same lines, and they're as important. (Interview 15)

HOW DID ADOPTERS FIRST ENCOUNTER IAR?



25% of interviewees first encountered IAR through social media, with two directly motivated to adopt by an Instagram post by Leonardo DiCaprio. A further 10% were inspired by an email they received from IAR, suggesting the centrality of online engagement for recruiting new adopters.

By contrast only 8% first encountered IAR through offline advertising (although these figures may be skewed by the recruitment of these interviewees online).

For 18% of interviewees *Red Ape* was their introduction to IAR, highlighting the power of orangutan-based media coverage.

1/5 interviewees were actively seeking to support orangutan conservation and discovered IAR through an online search.

WHY DO ADOPTERS CHOOSE IAR?

The four main reasons interviewees gave for choosing IAR over other orangutan charities include:

1. The range of other animals that they support
2. The tangible, hands-on work they do, as documented by *Red Ape*
3. IAR's status as a relatively small and 'non-corporate' charity
4. Linked to this, IAR's transparent use of donations to directly benefit animals

Other considerations included: IAR's mixture of conservation and animal welfare; its legitimacy as a UK registered charity; and its emphasis upon rehabilitation rather than life-long captivity.

ADOPTER FEEDBACK

Pass onto IAR that I am really appreciative of them sending those emails out more frequently now, that I think it helps me a lot with engaging other folks when I either give those as gifts or can show them, it keeps everybody really engaged rather than 'here's your one-time thing'. So I think that was really clever on their part to do that. (Interview 35)

As the years have gone by I've been really pleased with what they've been doing so I've just kept on and it's nice also to stay with the same animal. (Interview 27)

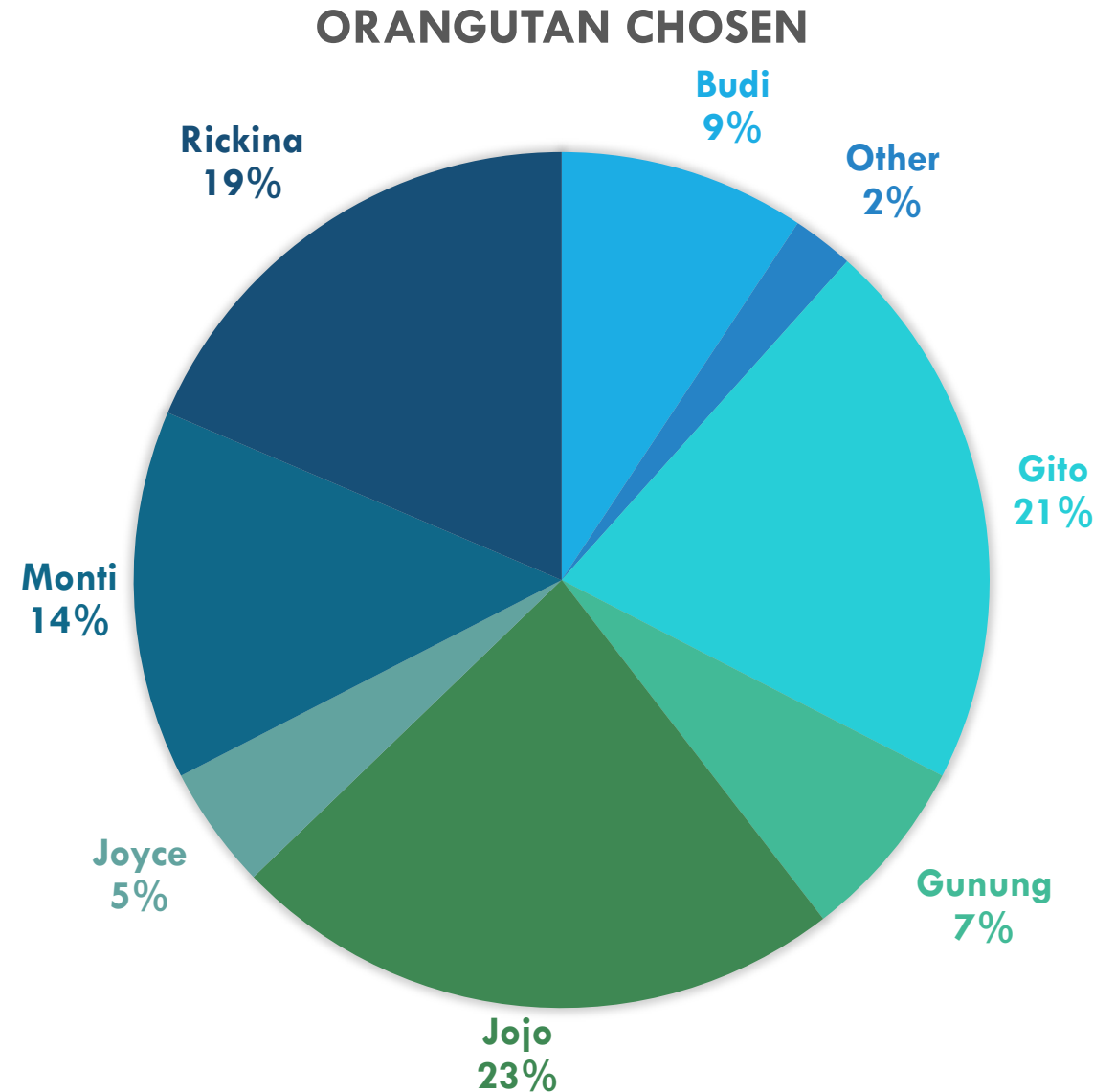
One of the things I really love about the little videos we get from International Animal Rescue is the fact that they are not sentimentalised. There is no mawkish music. It is just informative. (Interview 34)

WHY DO PEOPLE ADOPT PARTICULAR ORANGUTANS?

Many adopters mentioned being drawn towards a particular orangutan due to their tragic backstory, and the feeling that they were particularly vulnerable and needed help.

I went for Budi and I think it's because he was the smallest one at the time, the baby one at the time, and I think ... that was it, he was kept in a chicken coup or something, I'm not gonna retell it 'cause I'll start crying again but yeah, basically he just for me had the most tragic story. (Interview 1)

Other cited cuteness and newness at the centre as reasons for their choice. Some supporters had encountered IAR through a specific orangutan's story and so were keen to support that one. Others had personal associations with individual orangutan's names or features of their appearances.

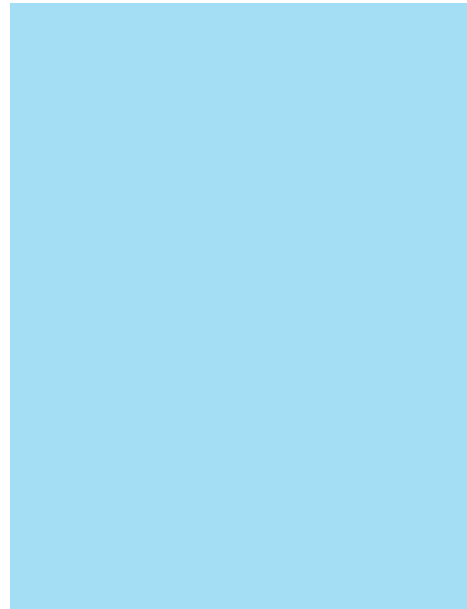


WHY DO PEOPLE ADOPT PARTICULAR ORANGUTANS?

Amongst the interviewees, Jojo was actually the most popular choice. Some mentioned a sense of continuity as he would be at the centre for life, and a sense of perpetual responsibility for Jojo's condition.

Many adopters also emphasized their desire as older people to support an older orangutan, or were drawn to his role in the origins of IAR's orangutan conservation work. For some it was an additional act of virtue to choose to support an older, uglier orangutan rather than a more appealing baby, suggesting the importance of maintaining a range of possible adoptees.

Others admitted their choice of orangutan was arbitrary, as their interest was primarily in the wider organisation.



WHAT DOES ADOPTION MEAN FOR ADOPTERS?

Many supporters were attracted to adoption, as opposed to a regular standing donation because it felt more personalised and it gave them a sense of ongoing emotional connection to a specific orangutan, whose life they got to learn about.

There's someone in the world that you've got a little bit of a connection to or something in the world that you know that you're making a difference in their life, and I think that makes you feel a little bit easier maybe about the extremely privileged life you live in the West.... And it just gives me joy to know that there's an actual individual or an actual animal that is the face of that for me so I can sort of look at those animals like Udin or Rickina and say, well I'm doing my little bit to help those animals. (Interview 22)

The personal narrative made it easier to engage others and raise awareness about orangutan conservation issues. They felt it was nice, more interesting than a standard donation, and that they got more for their money. The regular payments also inspired a sense of ongoing financial commitment.

I know the animal doesn't know who the heck you are and you're never going to meet them but you feel like, oh you know, I've got to keep supporting so and so. (Interview 28)

WHAT DOES ADOPTION MEAN FOR ADOPTERS?

A few adopters were less engaged with the plight of their particular adoptee, as they viewed the adoption as a means of supporting the charity more generally, and would have been happy to have just given a regular donation.

It is really nice to have a particular named orangutan who you feel you have this long-distance relationship with, but at the same time I am principally interested in the work they do generally with orangutans. In that sense I am more interested in IAR's general work rather than specifically with Gito, though we do check in with Gito and he does seem to be lovely. He seems to be a joker. (Interview 34)

Many supporters acknowledged that they were not the only adopters of that particular orangutan, nor that their money would solely go to them. Many shifted between a playful attachment to 'their orangutan' and a more pragmatic understanding of what the adoption was, as well as a concern for orangutan conservation more broadly.

WHY GIVE ADOPTIONS?

Adoptions are often given to younger relatives (children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews) in order to instill values of ecological interest and concern in the next generation.

Some adopters requested gift adoptions as they felt all their material needs were already met. Adoptions provide a less consumerist and more philanthropic and awareness-raising alternative to a conventional present.

Adoptions often begin as gifts, but through becoming attached to that particular orangutan, the gift recipient then takes on financial responsibility for the adoption once it is time to renew.

Adoptions can form a new basis for connection between family members, as they discuss updates and share photos and videos of their adoptee.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF UPDATES?

Updates were valuable for reassuring supporters that their donations were being put to good use.

One of the reasons why we continue to adopt with this particular group is that they do send us updates, not just about our animals but what the organisation is doing, and that always makes us feel like the money's really being used well so we have a lot of confidence in the organisation. (Interview 35)

Many supporters found them uplifting and encouraging:

The updates are great to read over and it always seems that there's progression – well I don't know about the other orangutans but every time with Rickina there's progression. I think this most recent update she was teaching other orangutans different life skills. So yeah, so it's always a positive improvement on how she was before, which obviously just goes to show the great work that they're doing. (Interview 24)

A few found the quantity of updates insufficient and yearned for greater connection:

But I don't have, I feel like I haven't received many proper updates about Gito. I don't get to see videos or pictures, or like a day in the life of, kind of thing. So I think that would actually help out a lot, because since I'm kind of adopting him, it would be nice to get an update every now and then about any major thing that's happened to him or, how he's doing, you know? (Interview 16)

HOW DO ADOPTERS FEEL ABOUT PALM OIL?

80% of UK-based interviewees were aware of the 2018 Iceland/Greenpeace commercial, and of those who had seen it 85% were positive about its messaging. A number of supporters were angry or annoyed about the prohibitions on its broadcast, although others opined that it may have been Iceland's intention all along or that it may have actually increased the video's virality.

I thought the video was perfectly OK to be honest. I find it absolutely unbelievable that you can have commercial breaks filled with advertisements about gambling and that is perfectly OK, but you can't have the Iceland palm oil advert. It is totally ridiculous in my view. So I think the advert should have been permitted. (Interview 20)

Other supporters were less keen on the commercial, deeming it overly cutesy and sentimental, or concerned that it misguidedly advocated a full palm oil ban, rather than endorses efforts towards sustainable palm oil.

I mean it would've been good if it was a good thing to remove all palm oil, but it turns out that it's not such a good thing to remove all palm oil because it's such an efficient oil. So actually they might've wasted all their money doing this huge thing, they've slightly got it wrong. (Interview 27)



HOW DO ADOPTERS FEEL ABOUT PALM OIL?

82% of interviewees actively avoided or made some effort to avoid consuming palm oil, with 13% focused just on avoiding non-RSPO certified palm oil. However many also expressed great mistrust of the certification process. Many struggled with the ubiquity of palm oil as an ingredient and the lack of transparent labelling, with those adopters who ate less processed food finding palm oil avoidance more straight forward.

The vast majority of adopters were very concerned by the impact of palm oil plantations on orangutan habitat, and deemed palm oil a cheap, unhealthy, unnecessary ingredient, associated it with human and corporate greed, and in many cases felt directly complicit in orangutan suffering through its consumption.



With many thanks to International Animal Rescue, and to the adopters who gave their time to speak with me.

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