

THE GLOBAL LIVES OF THE ORANGUTAN: ORANGUTAN ADOPTION RESEARCH

**ORANGUTAN FOUNDATION ADOPTERS
DR HANNAH FAIR, BRUNEL UNIVERSITY
OCTOBER 2019**

THE GLOBAL LIVES OF THE ORANGUTAN



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

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 as an act of gift giving and/ or in response to media coverage of orangutans. Adopters largely encounter OF through actively searching for a means to adopt, and have confidence in its small size and the practical work it achieves. Adopters tend to support a few other charities, but rarely other big international conservation organisations: consequently they have a particular interest in orangutans, which is another reason they choose OF. 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. Adopters actively support OF through fundraising and merchandise purchases and seek further avenues to do so. OF's key challenge is channeling this sense of responsibility and attachment to adoptees into adoption renewals.

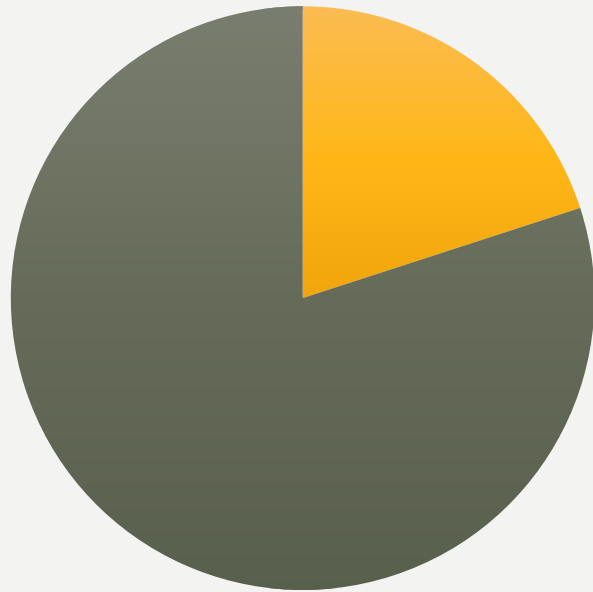
WHAT FORM DID THE RESEARCH TAKE?

Qualitative telephone interviews with 15 adopters, ranging in length from 25 minutes to an hour

Quantitative analysis of the 2018 adopter spreadsheet

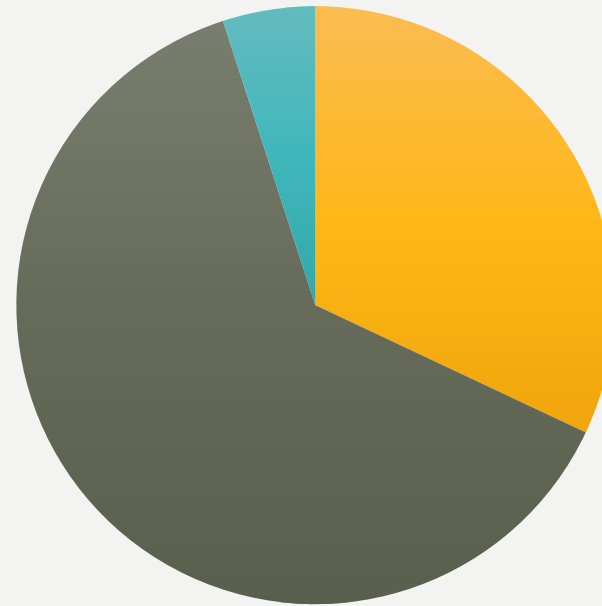
WHO WERE THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (GENDER)?

Interviewee's gender



■ Male ■ Female

Adopter's gender from spreadsheet



■ Male ■ Female ■ Unknown/ other

Although there were a disproportionate number of female interviewees, speaking to more women than men reflects the overall gender bias in orangutan adopters.

WHO WERE THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS?

ETHNICITY, NATIONALITY & LOCATION

- All interviewees were based in the UK, with 14/15 identifying as UK citizens and one as European. 14/15 interviewees were White, and one was Tamil.
- According to OF's database, 91% of adopters are UK-based. Consequently, one could have expected one of the interviewees to be based outside of the UK, but overall having only UK-based interviewees is not hugely unrepresentative of OF's supporter base.

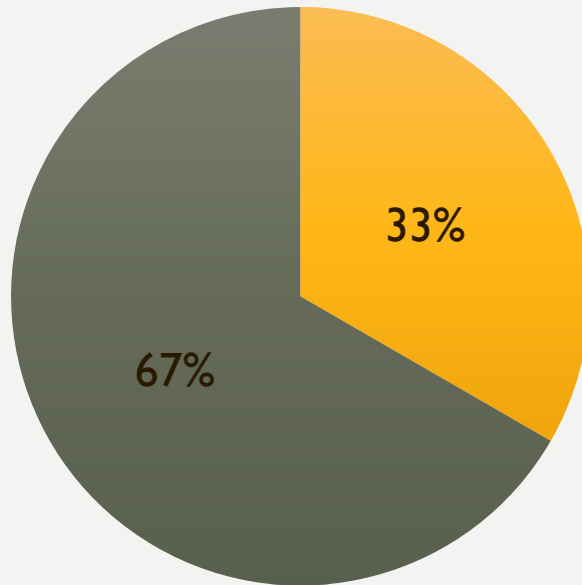
Adopter location
(spreadsheet)



■ UK ■ Overseas

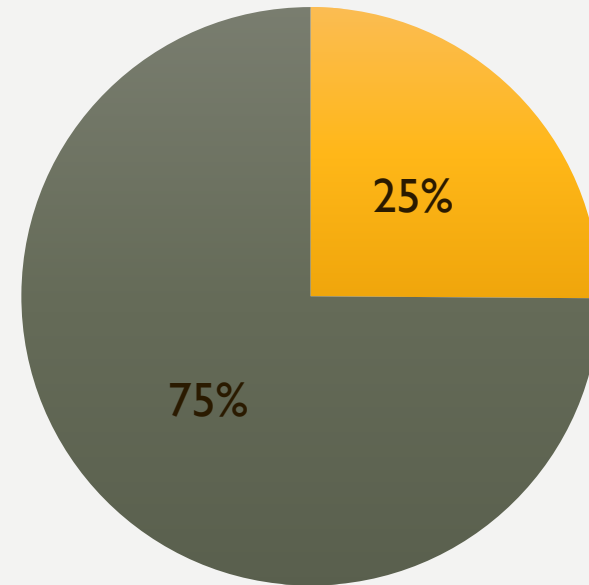
SELF VS. GIFT ADOPTIONS

Self vs. gift adoptions (interviewees)



■ Self ■ Gift

Self vs. gift adoptions (spreadsheet)

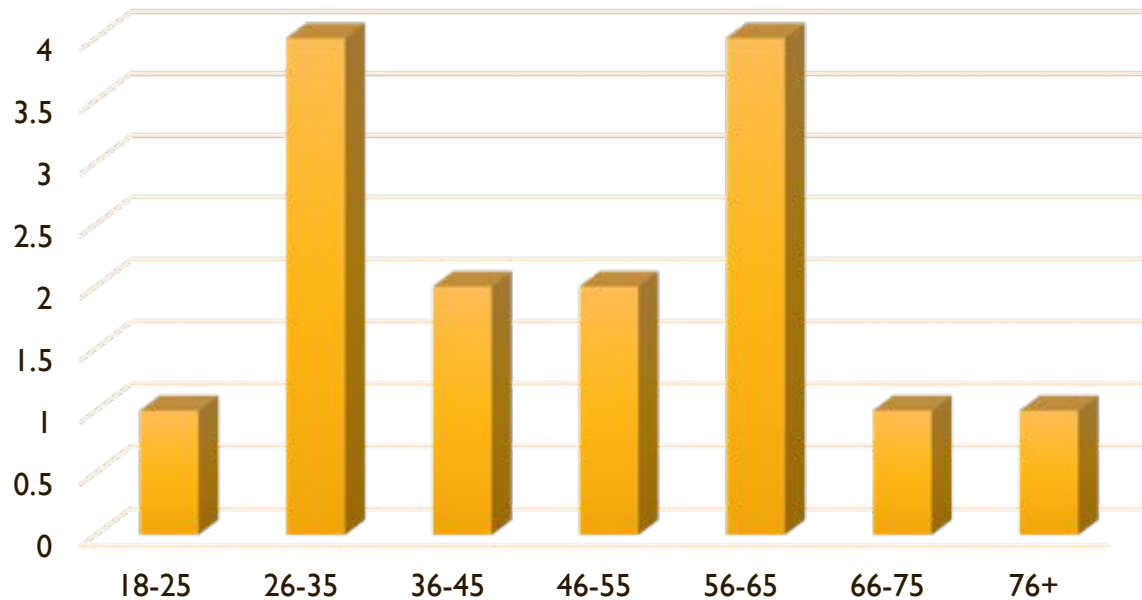


■ Self ■ Gift

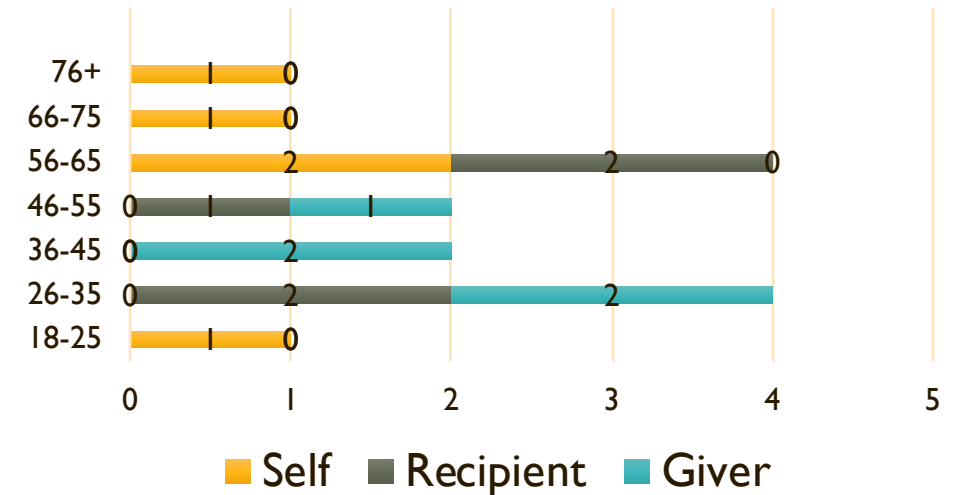
Although there was a slightly higher number of self-adopters among the interviewees than found within the spreadsheet, the ratio of self to gift adopters is still broadly reflective of the supporter base.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT AGE

Interviewee Age



Age in relation to giver, receiver or self-adopter status



These variations in patterns of giving, receiving and self-adopting across different age ranges suggests that people are attracted to orangutan adoption for different reasons at different life stages, with those at either ends of the age spectrum more likely to self-adopt, and those in their 30's-50's more likely to give or receive adoptions.

WHAT OTHER CHARITIES DO ADOPTERS SUPPORT?

Charitable exception:

- 20% of interviewees just supported OF, suggesting that OF is reaching people beyond the pool of established charitable givers.

Animal exception:

- 20% of adopters just support animal and conservation charities: the remaining 60% support a mixture of humanitarian, health, heritage and conservation charities, and a third of those exclusively support human-orientated charities, aside from OF. This suggests that the majority of adopters spoken with are not just 'animal people' in terms of their philanthropic concerns, but something about orangutans in particular or OF as a charity has attracted them.



WHAT OTHER CHARITIES DO ADOPTERS SUPPORT?

International conservation exception:

- Only one interviewee supported other non-orangutan international conservation charities (i.e. the Gorilla Organisation). So while 46% of adopters did support a local conservation organisation or domestic animal focused organisation, orangutans were the only international conservation concern they engaged with, again suggesting something particular about orangutans had attracted them.
- This suggests an appropriate fit between OF's exclusive focus upon one species and its habitats, and the interests of these particular supporters. One can also infer that supporters' interests encompass both conservation and individual animal welfare, suggesting strong potential appetite for initiatives such as sponsoring an acre.



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.



WHY DO PEOPLE CARE ABOUT ORANGUTANS?

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

- 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 four participants, but strongly disavowed as a motivation by another. For most adopters, their interest in orangutans emerges through a combination of these different factors.



WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TRIGGERS FOR ADOPTION?

Media coverage of orangutans encourages adoption, but is not the sole factor:

26% of interviewees mentioned the BBC documentary *Red Ape* as triggering their adoption, or encouraging greater concern about orangutan conservation in terms of their palm oil consumption, and one adopter explicitly named the Greenpeace/ Iceland advert as their motivation.

Adoptions can be a deliberate act of self-improvement:

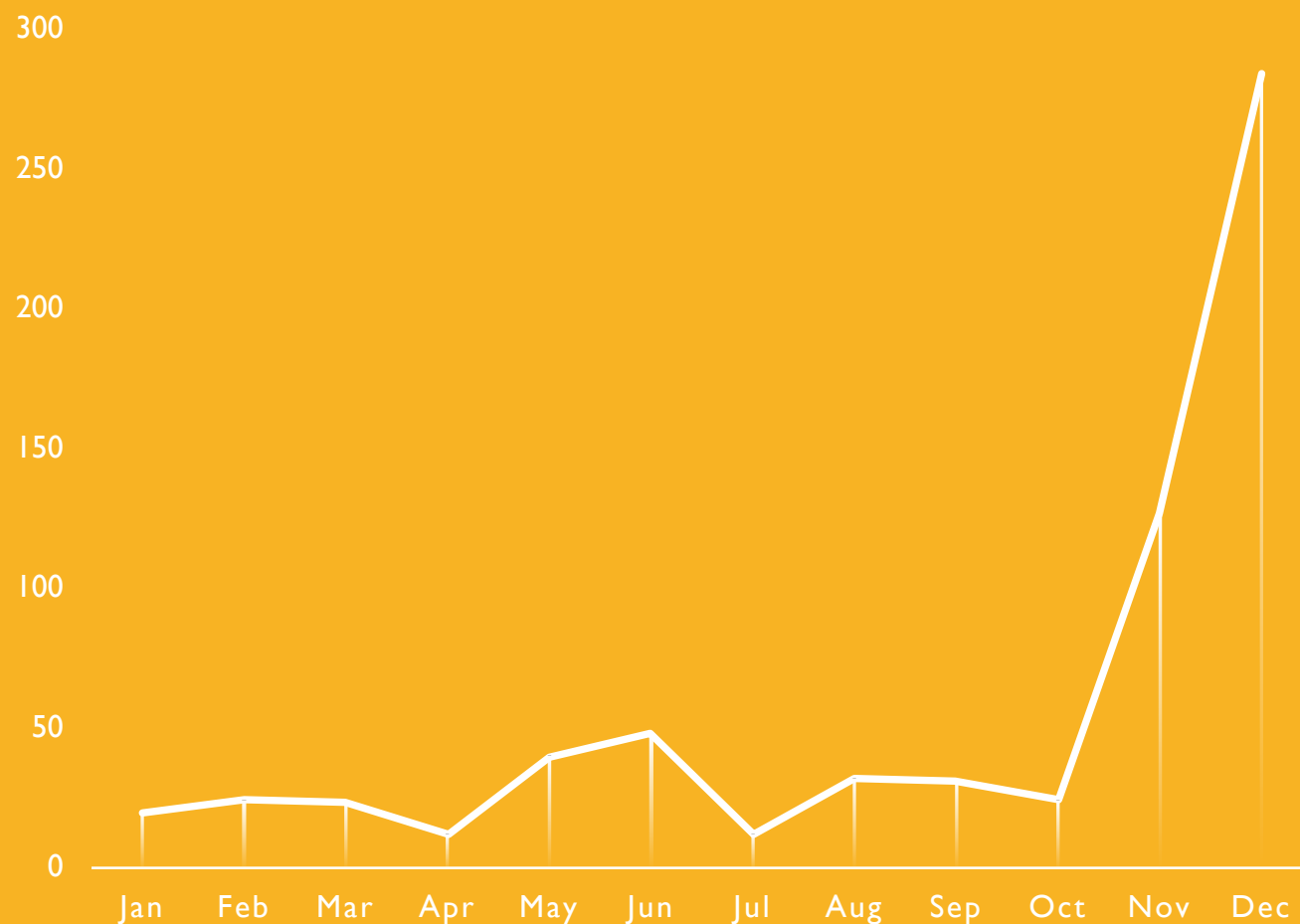
One adopter adopted as a new year's resolution, another converted the money they would have spent on (environmentally wasteful) Christmas cards into an orangutan adoption.

The majority of adoptions are gift adoptions:

Interviewees had given and received adoptions for birthdays, Christmas, Valentines and as congratulations for getting a new job.



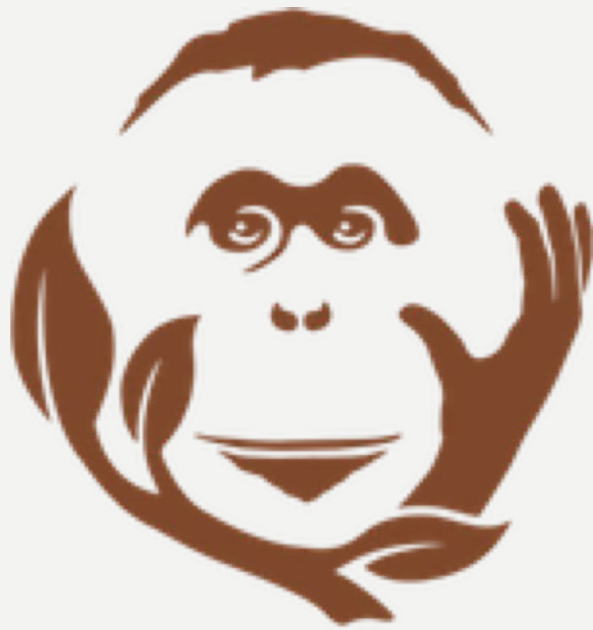
2018 OVERALL ADOPTIONS



ANNUAL TRENDS IN ADOPTION

These trends in the interviews are also borne out by the spreadsheet data. The impact of the *Red Ape* documentary (broadcast in May 2018), as well as the Iceland commercial (prohibited from broadcast in November 2018), and of Christmas gift giving are indicated by the adoption figures. Given that November and December adoption figures were both up by more than 350% on the previous year suggests the power of orangutan-based media.

HOW DID ADOPTERS FIRST ENCOUNTER OF?



60% of interviewees actively searched for an orangutan charity to adopt with, and discovered OF. This suggests OF benefits strongly from its web domain and its position at the top of google searches. But it also suggests that it captures active, intentional supporters more than chance potential supporters, as only one adopter became aware of OF through social media and one other through a fundraising letter.

OF also benefits from awareness raised by other organisations, as indicated by the interviewees who were motivated to adopt by viewing *Red Ape* (featuring International Animal Rescue). Those adopters were drawn towards rehabilitation work more generally, rather than that of IAR in particular.

WHY DO ADOPTERS CHOOSE OF?

The three main reasons interviewees gave for choosing OF over other orangutan charities include:

1. OF being a small charity, rather than a large corporate charity with big administrative overheads
2. Linked to this, faith that the money would be well spent and go directly to practical projects on the ground
3. The emphasis on forests and people, as well as orangutans.

Other considerations included: OF being a legitimate, long established organisation; its inclusion of local staff; the opportunities for volunteering with OF; it being specific to orangutans; and the emphasis on rehabilitation, as opposed to permanent captivity.

WHY DO PEOPLE ADOPT PARTICULAR ORANGUTANS?

The selection of a particular orangutan is less significant for OF supporters than IAR supporters, as OF offers fewer orangutans to choose from, and some interviewees adopted before there were multiple orangutans to choose from.

Adopters did mention being drawn towards either Mona or Okto's appearance, their name, or the fact that Mona was younger & newer and therefore might need more adopters (many adopters playfully engage with the idea that their adoption just helps a particular orangutan).



WHY DO PEOPLE ADOPT PARTICULAR ORANGUTANS?

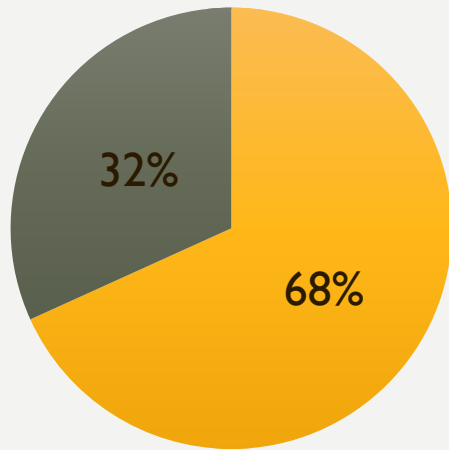
Gender is a significant consideration however. There is a trend (at least 68% of cases) towards gifting orangutans whose sex matches the recipient's gender:

'I think it was simple. He was a boy so we adopted him because we have got a little boy and he could be his little friend! Our son is only one, he's older than our son, but it is nice that they are both young. Mona was young too. If we were to be lucky enough to have a little girl one day we would probably get a girl one as well'. (Interview 12)



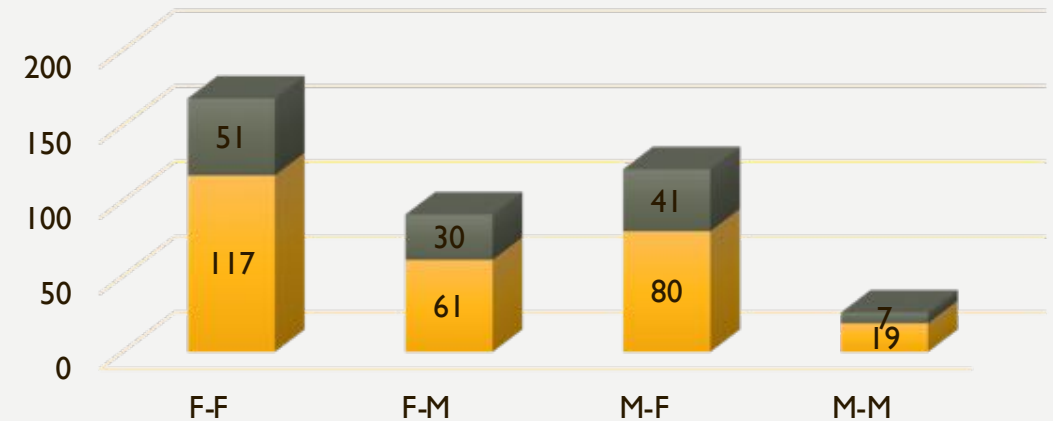
THE GENDER OF THE GIFT

Correlation of orangutan sex and recipient gender



■ Correlates ■ Doesn't correlate

Relationship between gender of giver and receiver and orangutan sex



■ Correlated orang ■ Non-corr orang

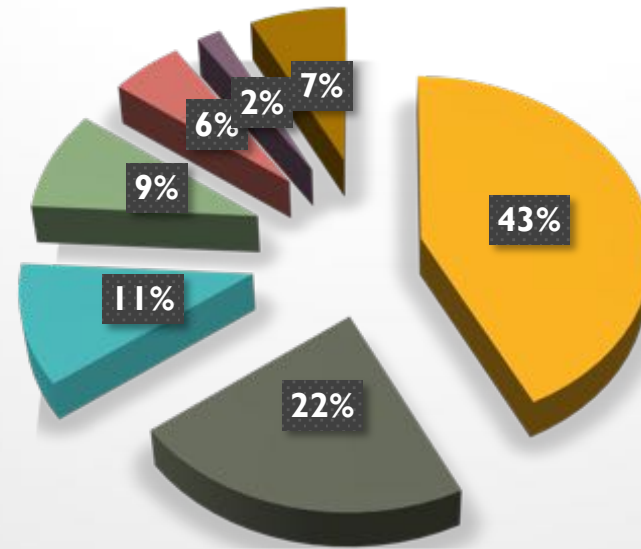
There are exceptions to this pattern, when it comes to balancing multiple adoptions (discussed later) and perceived gender preferences of recipients.

I don't know if there was anything to do with the sex of the two orangutans. Possibly. I think my mum has always had a soft spot... She has always had cats and she always seemed to prefer the male cats...maybe I was thinking along those lines subconsciously'. (Interview 10)

MULTIPLE ADOPTIONS

OF does not seem to have a base of 'menagerie adopters' (those that collect adoptions of a range of animal species), but does have a number of supporters who gift multiple orangutans. More than 92% of multiple adopters adopted a balanced number of Oktos and Monas, in 43% of cases for a clear duo (e.g. two siblings, a couple), and in 22% of cases for two unrelated people. This suggests the attraction of having precisely two adoptees available: supporters do not want to feel like they're leaving one orangutan behind.

Multiple adoption motivations



- For clear duo one Okto one Mona
- One Okto, one Mona gift
- Okto & Mona for school/ organisation
- Okto & Mona for self
- Okto & Mona for themselves & another
- Both Okto & Mona given to one person
- Other Okto/ Mona gift combinations

WHAT DOES ADOPTION MEAN FOR ADOPTERS?

Many supporters were attracted to adoption, as opposed to a regular standing donation because:

- It felt more personalized and they felt connected to a specific orangutan, whose life they got to learn about
- 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

Adoptions can encourage a sense of ongoing financial commitment to a particular orangutan.

I now have a vested interest in Mona and how she is doing and her progress, which I don't think you would get if it was just a £5 a month nameless bank thing. (Interview 14)

WHAT DOES ADOPTION MEAN FOR ADOPTERS?

A few adopters were indifferent to the individualised nature of the adoption, and just saw it as a convenient way to donate to the organization. Others began with a species-level focus on orangutan conservation and arbitrarily chose which orangutan to adopt, but to their surprise went on to develop a strong emotional attachment to their particular adoptee.

But it is the Foundation really that I'm committed to but it's quite nice to have this little face for it. This is going to sound terrible, so if Mona fell out of the tree, I would still be committed to the Foundation. Mona was just an added little bonus... So, yeah, I was surprised that you could get quite attached to a picture. It's sad, isn't it? (Interview 1)

Many supporters acknowledged that they were not the only adopters of that particular orangutan, nor that their money would solely go to Okto or Mona. 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 are also a way for children to express their own agency, through directly fundraising for orangutan conservation and then receiving the adoption as evidence or reward for their efforts.

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.

HOW MUCH DO ADOPTERS ENGAGE WITH UPDATES?

All interviewees were recruited via the adoption updates, so consequently this research only speaks to those who are actively reading the materials they receive. However, among this pool of adopters only one felt that they received insufficient updates about 'their orangutan'.

Two, who had gifted the adoption to a family member, mentioned sharing and discussing the updates with the gift recipient, suggesting that updates can bring an element of family bonding to gift adoptions. A number of adopters warmly referenced Okto's lack of nest building skills, suggesting that the updates play an important role in individualising the adopted orangutan and furthering the adopter's sense of care and concern.

OTHER WAYS TO SUPPORT OF

In addition to their adoption, 53% of adopters raised funds for OF or for another charity, through engaging in a sponsored run or walk, a bake sale, or selling palm-oil free products that they had made themselves. 20% of the adopters also supported the organization through buying merchandise.

Increasing engagement opportunities:

Adopters requested other ways of engaging with or supporting OF, from raffles to easy routes into the sponsorship of swims or runs. Many interviewees were also attracted by voluntourism and the possibility of visiting Borneo. Adopters are likely to be a key audience for the Steppes tours or OF volunteering initiatives.



HOW DO ADOPTERS FEEL ABOUT PALM OIL?

While 20% of interviewees were not aware of the Iceland/ Greenpeace commercial, 73% of interviewees were positive about its messaging, with one supporter motivated to adopt because of it, and another actively avoiding the commercial in case it was too distressing.

'I think it was awful it got banned. It is great that Iceland are making the best effort to remove palm oil or get responsibly sourced palm oil for their products. I thought, why on earth is that something that shouldn't be widely known?'

(Interview 12)

40% were angry or annoyed about the prohibition on its broadcast. However one adopter criticized the advert for being too childish for a serious topic, and another was concerned it oversimplified palm oil as an issue.



HOW DO ADOPTERS FEEL ABOUT PALM OIL?

Two thirds 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.

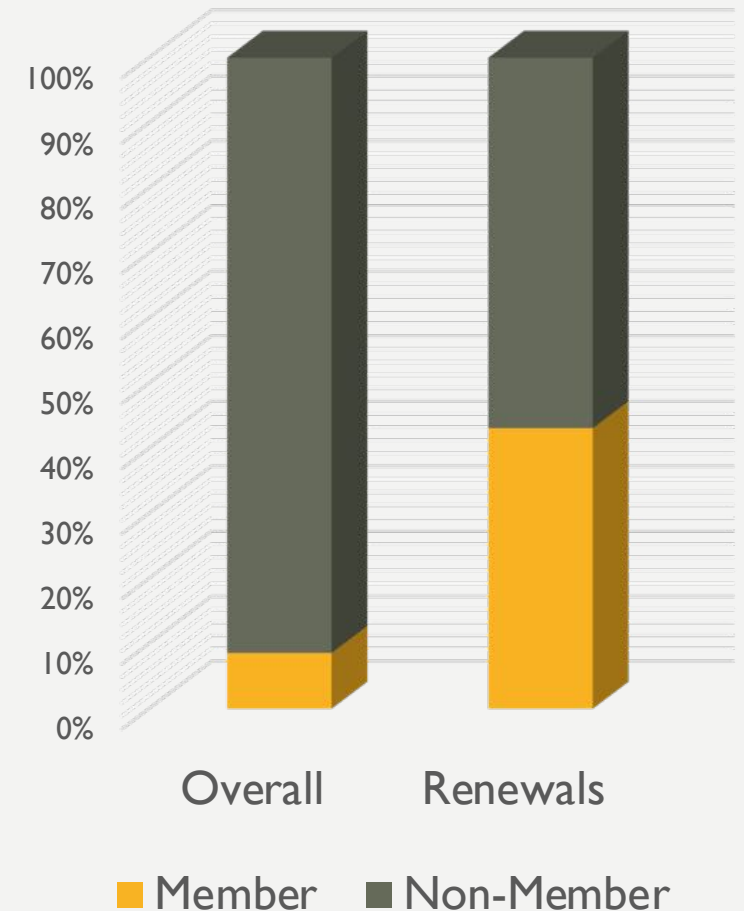


THE CHALLENGE OF RENEWALS

Current adoption figures suggest that OF's main challenge is not attracting new adopters, but retaining adopters through encouraging renewals.

Although OF members make up only a small proportion of the overall adoption database (9%) they accounted for 43% of renewals in 2018. This suggests that those more committed to OF's work (through membership) are more likely to renew, but also that increasing engagement with OF's wider work (for example through sending the newsletter to adopters) could encourage more renewals.

Proportion of membership adoptions & renewals





With many thanks to Orangutan Foundation, and to the adopters who gave their time to speak with me.

Dr Hannah Fair, Brunel University hannah.fair@brunel.ac.uk

The Global Lives of the Orangutan

<https://globallivesoftheorangutan.org>

@GLO_ERC @hanthropocene

