

The release of Aceng's macaque group

By Karmele Sanchez

8 September 2006

Today is a very special day at the rescue centre in Cikananga. One of our groups of pig tailed macaques that has been with us for more than two years, is getting ready for release.

Aceng's group was socialised during May and June 2005. Only Tukul and Asep joined the group later in May of this year. The socialisation of macaques is a very difficult but important process. The macaque is a gregarious species and needs to live in groups in order to survive.

All these macaques have spent years confined in cages and living in isolation. Once, they were poached from the wild and separated from their families, and then purchased by people at animal markets. They are very cute monkeys when they are still babies. None of them had had the chance to meet with other members of their species before, and learning social skills is not always an easy task. However, they often form a group with other members of the same species very easily. They are very much in need of social contact.



In May 2006 a team from ProAnimalia headed to Lampung, in the South of Sumatra, in search of a suitable place for the release of pig tailed macaques. The legal and illegal animal trade in Indonesia is still huge and difficult to control. Laws that should stop the trade are not enough if they are not enforced. Lampung is still one of the areas which have the richest biodiversity. However, the illegal trade from this area is huge because of the proximity to Jakarta and the accessibility by boat and car. Poaching of animals is still common. Organised animal mafias make sure these animals end up in Jakarta to be sold at any animal market.

Different investigations conducted in that area point out that the species of animals most commonly traded are macaques and lorises. These animals are frequently seen at markets in Jakarta.

In June the survey team in Lampung found an area that seemed ideal for the release of the macaques. It may be that diminishing numbers of pig tailed macaques are a cause for concern in terms of conservation. However, no data on wild populations of this species is yet available and this species of primates still faces no protection in Indonesia.

Batuteği is a forested area occupying a space of almost 11 thousand hectares of primary forest.

This area is not yet under any protection although it still contains species like siamangs, gibbons, snakes and wild pigs. During the survey the team found out that

even Sumatran tigers are still present in this area. The Sumatran tiger is one of the most endangered species of felines.

The difficult access (its southern boundary is a dam) has preserved this area from over-exploitation. However, some areas have still been subjected to illegal logging. As a result of this survey we have been able to show the value of this precious and biodiversity-rich forest. The survey's findings were then presented to the Department of Forestry in Lampung. From the beginning, the head of this department was very keen to help us with the project. The release of these animals would provide the opportunity to protect the area and restrict the public's access to it.



One by one all the members of the Aceng group are sedated by our veterinary team. They undergo a thorough check-up. They are measured and given medication against parasites. They are fitted with an identification microchip and a blood sample is taken to be stored. After that, they are put into their transport cages. It's a long way to the forest. They still don't know how lucky they are to get the chance to get back to the wild...

9 September 2006

It's only 4:30 am when we arrive in the city of Lampung. There, we meet the rangers and some of our colleagues who will accompany us to the release site.

We head to the Forestry Office. Paper work has to be completed before we continue to the release site.



In Batutegi dam, four boats are waiting for us. They will take us to the mouth of the river. When we get there, the transport cages are carried by the porters. It's not much more than 2km but going up that steep cliff is not an easy task when carrying a macaque of around 15kg...



A habituation cage had been built by the ProAnimalia team just one week before our departure. With the help of some local people and forestry officers the cage was ready very quickly. This cage, made out of bamboo, would provide a place for the macaques to get used to the new location. A difficult job in a place with such a difficult access: mesh was not an option.



At 2pm on 9 September, one by one all six macaques are released into the habituation cage. They are soon very interested in their new environment. From the first day of their stay, the macaques are fed leaves and other plants from the surrounding area. They seem to like them and don't hesitate to eat them at all...

12 September 2006

They only need a couple of days to have enough of their habituation cage: this morning we find them all outside the pen. They have released themselves!

Soon they manage to follow us towards the camp, about 1km away from their release site. We had to make the decision to move our camp further down the river.

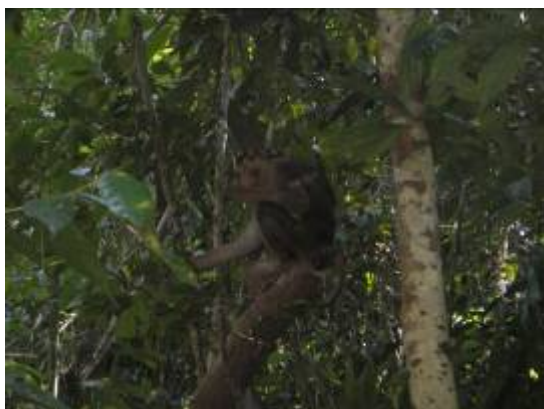
We enjoy seeing how they climb and jump from one tree to another with such confidence it's as if they have always done it.



14 September 2006

This day is the date of the celebration. Many officers from the Local Government and from the Department of Forestry joined us in for a special ceremony to celebrate that the macaques have been released successfully and that the area will from that moment be protected and access will be restricted.

Different journalists from local newspapers and two different national television broadcasters accompany us that day. A couple of days later the event is broadcast nationally. During the ceremony, ProAnimalia raises the issue that pig tailed macaques should be protected and that population data is very much needed in order to assess the state of the species.



Currently, there is still a monitoring group in the field collecting data and assessing how the macaques are getting on. We are sure that these macaques have been brought back to freedom, to have a second chance to live as nature intended.