SUSTAINABILITY BRIEF

Update from the field **June 2015**

Siamang Gibbons Finding Sanctuary in Wilmar Plantations

On March 2015, the High Conservation Value (HCV) area in PT Kencana Sawit Indonesia (KSI), a subsidiary of Wilmar International Limited in Sumatra, Indonesia, gained six new residents. Ponidi, Susi, Dikdik, Ami, Nono and Cimut are six gibbons who have moved into the area in August 2014, and are housed in acclimatised cages around Bukit Tengah Pulau, the HCV area in PT KSI. This was a culmination of eight years of efforts and hard work by the local NGO, Kalaweit Foundation, in its mission to save gibbons and their habitats.

Figure 1 : Ponidi and Susi

Siamang, scientifically known as *Symphalangus syndactylus*, is a species of gibbon found mainly in Peninsular Malaysia and the provinces of Sumatra and Kalimantan in Indonesia. Gibbons are classified as lesser apes and are mostly arboreal. They move effortlessly among the tree-tops like gymnasts with extremely long limbs. While they are classified as gibbons, the siamangs are the only species found within the genus of *Symphalangus,* while the other gibbons are classified under the genus of *Hylobates,* due to webbing between their second and third toes (*syn*: connected; *dactyl*: toes).

A vocal pouch on their necks, known as the *gular* pouch, enables them to create long and distinct calls for the purpose of defending their territories and strengthening the social bonds within the same social group. Their diet is quite varied, as compared to other gibbons, feeding on leaves, fruits, flowers and insects, and are mostly diurnal or active during daytime.

Siamangs are a protected species in Indonesia and Malaysia, and are categorised as vulnerable to extinction under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of species. Threats to their survival include habitat destruction (as they are highly dependent on the forest for their food and movement), poaching and the illegal pet trade. In particular, their interesting appearance has made them a unique target as pets. Nevertheless, as these siamangs grow older, they demand more attention and would require special care.

The Kalaweit Foundation is a local Indonesian non-profit organisation which specialises in the rescue and rehabilitation of gibbons. The siamangs and gibbons which have been rescued from poachers or people who kept them as pets require a long period of rehabilitation as they will need to be taught skills in survival and foraging. These also include a relearning of social skills and ways to interact with members of their own species.

The rehabilitation programme is therefore aimed at empowering and enabling the rescued siamangs to be returned to the wild. Part of achieving this objective is in the identification of suitable habitats for this purpose. On 22 April 2014, the Kalaweit Foundation signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with PT KSI, to reintroduce siamang population in the plantation company's HCV area, specifically at Bukit Tengah Pulau.

Bukit Tengah Pulau, with an approximate size of 300 ha, is the largest HCV block in PT KSI. Prior to the release of the siamangs into the HCV area, an extensive floral and faunal survey were conducted to ensure that:

i) there is no existing siamang population in the area;

ii) there is enough food to sustain the population of the siamangs; and

iii) there would not be any competition or conflict for food and territory with other gibbon species in the area

This was done by conducting sampling via transects and conducting auditory census and reconnaissance survey. The floral survey was conducted on 20 metre x 20 metre sampling plots.

The surveys confirmed that there was only one species of gibbon found in the area, which is the *Hylobates agilis of the Hylobates species*. Other primates found in the area include the long-tailed macaques, the pig-tailed macaques and the endangered mitred leaf monkeys. The floral survey showed that 89% of the plants can be made available as food for the siamangs.

Beyond the availability of food, the forest in the HCV area of PT KSI was conducive for the gibbons because it has good tree and plant covers that provide good shelter. Gibbons are mostly - if not exclusively - arboreal; as such, their survival is dependent on the availability of tall trees with a diameter of at least about 40cm for their shelter and movement.

Post-release monitoring is an essential part of re-introductions to ensure the gibbons are coping well in the wild. The researchers of Kalaweit Foundation will monitor the six gibbons for a year to evaluate problems of the re-introduced animals before determining the success of the programme.

Figure 2 : The positions of the three acclimatisation cages established in the HCV area of PT KSI.