



PERSON OF THE FOREST

DURATION: 17 mins | **DIRECTOR:** Melissa Lesh & Tim Laman

In the vanishing lowland rainforests of Borneo, research is underway to uncover and understand the unique cultural behaviors in wild orangutans before it's too late. There, photographer Tim Laman, researcher Cheryl Knott and young explorer Robert Suro have documented these incredible animals in action as the orangutans make pillows, fashion umbrellas and display their greetings. The project, 20 years in the making, offers a fascinating glimpse into the habits of these apes, as well as a window into human evolution. And with habitat disappearing at an alarming rate, the research may prove to be key in protecting this critically endangered species.



STANDARDS

Literacy in History/Social Studies:

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4 (Craft and Structure)**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

Literacy in Science:

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.6-8.2 (Key Ideas and Details)**

Determine the central ideas or conclusions of a text; provide an accurate summary of the text distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.6-8.7 (Integration of Knowledge and Ideas)**

Integrate quantitative or technical information expressed in words in a text with a version of that information expressed visually (e.g., in a flowchart, diagram, model, graph, or table).

Writing:

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.E (Text Types and Purposes)**

Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

TAGS: Animal conservation, extinction, orangutans, Borneo, Sumatra, Indonesia

VOCABULARY: Culture, extinct, endangered, conservation, habitat

FILMMAKER INTERVIEW: MELISSA LESH



WHERE DID YOU GROW UP? Madison, Wisconsin

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE COLOR? Peacock Blue

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE FOOD? Anything in season growing fresh in my garden. OR mangos (in India) and raspberries (fresh off the vine). Can't forget chocolate. Those three combined!

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE FILM? This year, Chasing Coral. Of all time, Microcosmos

IF YOU COULD HAVE ANY SUPERPOWER, WHAT WOULD IT BE? Interspecies telepathy. Umwelt power! Essentially to view the world through the eyes of any animal on earth, at any time.

WHAT IS ONE THING YOU ARE AFRAID OF? Being buried alive.

WHY DID YOU BECOME A FILMMAKER AND HOW DID YOU GET STARTED?

In college I studied Fine Art, painting and printmaking. I was simultaneously working as a biological technician with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Northern Maine. I found myself increasingly wanting to combine the two, science and art. Eventually I started filming wildlife on the refuge and interviewing the biologists. From there I taught myself to edit and began working on other natural history and conservation stories. That became my way of building a bridge.



HOW DID YOU MEET CHERYL AND ROBERT AND WHY DID THIS STORY APPEAL TO YOU?

I met Cheryl and Robert through Trevor Frost, a co-producer on the film and at the time a camera assistant for Tim Laman, cinematographer and co-director on the film. They were all working together in the rainforests of Borneo with the orangutans. I found the story fascinating because it focused on a creature I knew very little about at the time. New cultural behaviors in wild orangutans were, and are continuing to be discovered and I was excited to learn about them through the process of working on the film. It didn't hurt that everyone involved, Tim, Cheryl, Robert, Richard and Trevor, are all wonderful people to work with!

WHEN EDITING THE FILM, WAS THERE ANYTHING YOU WISHED YOU COULD HAVE INCLUDED IN THE FINAL CUT?

There were many amazing cultural behaviors captured on camera, some never before seen and others never before filmed that I would have liked to include. In one scene, Robert filmed an orangutan attempting to harvest honey from a hive. The bees started to swarm. The orangutan clambered down through the trees and the bees flew toward Robert in an attempt to sting him. In another scene an orangutan was using a medical plant to rub its eyes, a new behavior that is still being researched. In another scene an orangutan is using a tree branch with mosquito repellent properties to make its nest in a mosquito-ridden swamp. These are just a few examples of the complex lives they live, much of which we know very little about.

WHEN YOU MADE THE FILM, DID YOU HAVE A SPECIFIC AUDIENCE IN MIND?

Our goal was to premiere at Mountainfilm, so I had that in the back of my mind. However, our main goal was to make a film that resonated with anyone who was unfamiliar with orangutan life and culture. We hoped that the film would connect people with orangutans by showing them how similar we are. Specifically for audiences closest to the orangutans, Borneo and Sumatra, we created an Indonesian version to screen in communities throughout the country.

IS THERE AN ACTION YOU HOPE PEOPLE ARE INSPIRED TO TAKE AFTER SEEING THIS FILM?

My hope is that people come away from the film with a sense of connection and urgency. Learning how similar we are to orangutans, I think it is natural to feel compelled to want to know more and learn how to help. This film was not meant to be a direct call to action, but instead an emotional bridge to understanding, feeling and seeing how similar we are. There are so many ways in which they need our help and many organizations on the ground to support, so my hope with this film was to spark a deeper, more personal connection to orangutan life and culture. First we need to fall in love, only then can we jump into action.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES YOU ENCOUNTERED MAKING THIS FILM?

As far as directing and editing went, one of the main challenges was reviewing and organizing 8+ terabytes of footage, created by a handful of different cinematographers over several years. The footage was compiled from many different projects including 'Mission Critical' - a TV show for Nat Geo Wild, a year-long Young Explorer Grant project, numerous independent grants, field assistant footage, and filmed with GoPros, DSLRs, handy cams, 4K cinema cameras, all of which needed to be reviewed and categorized before I could start editing the story. The film was pulled from this collection of footage alongside three days of filmed interviews. Color correction had to be done to make sure all of the different types of footage matched and operated seamlessly. Technically it was a bit daunting, but the story, for the most part, fell right into place!

HAS WORKING ON THIS PROJECT CHANGED YOUR OUTLOOK ON CONSERVATION OF ANIMAL SPECIES?

This project has sparked an interest of mine in animal intelligence that I am continuing to work on and hoping to implement as a tool for conservation. The more I learn about non-human culture and intelligence, the more I understand its ability to change hearts and minds. The faster we can recognize the links between humans and the rest of the animal world, the faster we can work to conserve species in need. That emotional connection has to be there.

WHY DO YOU THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO INCLUDE THIS FILM IN MOUNTAINFILM FOR STUDENTS?

Orangutans are one of our closest relatives. If we are unable to protect and keep them from going extinct, I don't see much hope for any other species. For students, I think learning about wild orangutans and their behaviors is very important because it has the ability to inform and inspire decisions down the road; early experiences inevitably shape who we are and who we become. I think learning about orangutan culture at a young age has the potential to change our perspective from an anthropocentric view to a more biocentric one, extending our empathy to all living things and helping us realize that we aren't so different after all.



WHAT'S THE NEXT BIG ADVENTURE OR FILM PROJECT ON THE HORIZON FOR YOU?

Currently I am continuing to explore this topic of animal intelligence and am hoping to create a larger film focusing on many species and what they can teach us. Co-producer on the film 'Person of the Forest', Trevor Frost and I are working to get support for this story and are in the beginning stages of production. Our goal is to film and compile groundbreaking scientific discoveries currently underway that are helping us understand and communicate with other species. While we continue to search for intelligent beings in the depths of our solar system, we are finding non-human cognition right here on our own planet; crows manipulating tools; chimpanzees plotting complex group attacks and planning for the future; orangutans using plants with medicinal properties; alligators collecting sticks on their heads to lure prey; octopus solving underwater puzzles; dogs using 1,000 word vocabularies; parrots performing math problems; elephants returning to burial sites to mourn their dead; and dolphins coordinating hunts in a language we are just beginning to unlock.

WHAT IS ONE PIECE OF ADVICE YOU CAN GIVE STUDENTS THAT YOU WISH SOMEONE HAD SHARED WITH YOU?

By all means, be passionate! ..but never forget compassion. The more we can learn and understand each other, other species and our own, the better we can promote the wellbeing of all life on earth. No matter how strongly you feel about an issue, a cause, a process, remember to stay open-minded, there is always much more we don't know than what we do. We are just beginning to scratch the surface.

SUBJECT INTERVIEW: ROBERT RODRIGUEZ SURO



WHERE DID YOU GROW UP? I grew up in Carolina, Puerto Rico

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE COLOR? Green!

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE FOOD? I love starting my day with a great breakfast! As far as cuisine, I think Thai. Or maybe Indonesian!

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE FILM? That's hard, there are many greats to choose from. "Y Tu Mamá También" is the first one I thought of. It encapsulates "life" and all the hidden details of human connections so well.

IF YOU COULD HAVE ANY SUPERPOWER, WHAT WOULD IT BE? Super-intelligence would be the most useful for making positive contributions to the world.

WHAT IS ONE THING YOU ARE AFRAID OF? I'm afraid of regret. My goal is to make choices that I can look back and be happy about because you can never go back in time to make different ones. Only one chance!

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO SHARE THIS STORY?

I wanted to share what the experience of living among wild orangutans in the rainforest was like. Not everyone gets the opportunity to do so, and I value the two years I spent in the rainforest in Borneo.



IS THERE AN ACTION YOU HOPE PEOPLE ARE INSPIRED TO TAKE AFTER SEEING THIS FILM?

I hope people are inspired to view humans' relationship to orangutans, to other primates, and to other life on earth, through a new perspective. Seeing the parallels in the film between human behavior and culture, and that of orangutans, will hopefully help people understand that all life on earth is related, special, and something that we as humans should value, steward over, and conserve.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES YOU ENCOUNTERED DURING THE MAKING OF THIS FILM?

The challenges of working in the field mostly by myself to gather footage of these wild orangutans were tough! Spending multiple days following orangutans meant eating the same thing every day, sleeping in a hammock every night, avoiding insect bites and spiny plants, never being dry due to the rain, and a lot of loneliness! But it was all worth it for the moments when I was able to capture some unique orangutan behavior.

HAS WORKING ON THIS PROJECT CHANGED YOUR OUTLOOK ON CONSERVATION OF ANIMAL SPECIES?

Discussing the impact of film and media on conservation after the film premiered at Telluride was an important part of the process that taught me some wisdom on the matter. For filmmakers, the first instinct is to make a film that appeals to them, that tells the story they want to tell. But when thinking about nature conservation films, the end goal should really be to cause the greatest impact possible. Sometimes this might mean changing your vision slightly, perhaps including or omitting something that you might not have otherwise. As an example, should the term "evolution" be mentioned in a film about orangutan and rainforest conservation? Evolution is a fact, and my first instinct as a scientist would be to definitely include it. But would the inclusion of the term "evolution" turn off some viewers of the film and lead them to ignore the overall message of the film: that we need to protect orangutans? These are questions that filmmakers need to ask themselves as they carve out what their message and intended impact is. We need to take target audiences into account and pick our battles for maximum impact.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ORANGUTAN COMMUNITIES TO BETTER OUR OWN?

That diet is important! From research, we know that orangutans have several cultural feeding traditions, and the life history of orangutans is intricately tied to the food they have available in their environment. Mothers spend years taking care of their babies, teaching them to forage for food and how to identify the best fruit to eat. The nutrition of an orangutan can determine their success at reproduction, so it's important for them to be well fed from an early age. While we humans don't have to go out hunting and gathering anymore, every time we go foraging in the supermarket, we are faced with overwhelming choices. Making the best choices can maximize our potential to lead healthy, successful lives. Eating is one of the most important parts of human culture, and it's important to develop a culture of healthy eating.

WHY DO YOU THINK IT IS IMPORTANT TO INCLUDE THIS FILM IN MOUNTAINFILM FOR STUDENTS?

I don't think people are too aware that other species besides human can have culture. I knew that when I first learned about orangutan culture during my freshman year of college, my mind was blown. It gave me a new perspective on the definition of intelligence and where we stand in relation to the rest of the animal world. We've always know that we're not so different from our primate cousins. But as we learn more and more about the existence of cultural elements in other species such as whales and birds, that differential gap between ourselves and other species is continually narrowing. It's important that we see that we're not unique. We're all are part of the same world and all have value.

WHAT'S THE NEXT ADVENTURE ON THE HORIZON FOR YOU?

My goal is to have a dual-career in medicine and photography/filmmaking! Before I got involved with this project, my plan was to go on to medical school. Now, after having spent two years in the forest, I can't see myself as a career doctor. I would like to continue contributing to nature and wildlife conservation through film and media. Medicine is still important to me though. So I found a good compromise: going to PA school instead of medical school. A career as a PA would give me the flexibility I need to lead a successful lifestyle while still giving me the time and opportunity to make positive contributions as a conservationist film-maker.

WHAT IS ONE PIECE OF ADVICE YOU CAN GIVE STUDENTS THAT YOU WISH SOMEONE HAD SHARED WITH YOU?

When it comes to careers and schooling, take things slow but have a set of goals in mind. I think smart students are often so driven to succeed that sometimes they don't pause to consider their options and keep their minds open to alternate paths. College – and especially the period before and after it – are pivotal moments in our lives. I think it's important to get some breathing room and take some time to learn more about yourself and discover your strengths, your weaknesses, your likes, your dislikes, before committing to a new major or career path. Take some time off and do something different for a while if you can! Volunteering, working, even traveling, are all good options. Anything that gives you some "real-life" experience is great. Just don't lose your momentum and keep an eye on your goals.



PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITY

To familiarize students with the vocabulary essential to understanding the content of The Person of the Forest, ask students to complete the word ladder individually or as a whole class. If you have never completed a word ladder before, the students start on the first row (#1) and use the hints to work their way up. The definition of the word is highlighted in bold.

STUDENT VERSION	HINTS FOR STUDENTS	ANSWER
5. _ _ _ b _ _ _ _ t	All letters of this word are different. The first five letters mean "something that you do often or regularly." (ex: Smoking is a disgusting _ _ _ _ _) The environment in which an animal or plant normally lives or grows	Habitat
4. c _ _ _ _ _ v _ _ _ i _ _ n	Keep the first letter the same. The last four letters are a suffix meaning "to express action." Saving or protecting something	Conservation
3. _ _ u _ _ _ u _ _ _	Change the first letter of the word to a 'c,' and the last letter to a 'e.' Shared beliefs of a civilization	Culture
2. _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ e d	Keep the first letter of the first word. The prefix means "within" or "in." The word means to be threatened with harm	Endangered
1. _ _ x _ _ _ _ _ _ t	No longer exists , dinosaurs are an example	Extinct

After completing the word ladder, review the definitions in bold with the students. For more review, or in place of the word ladder, write the words on sticky notes and have the students stick the sticky note to their forehead without looking at the word. Once everyone has a sticky note on their forehead, have the students partner up and explain the word on each other's forehead to the other person without using the word.



INTRODUCING THE FILM

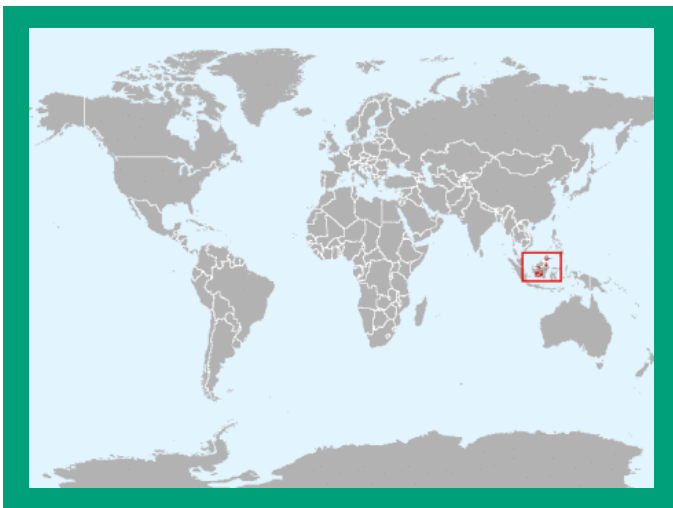


Prior to starting the movie, you may want to assess what students may already know about endangered species, or if they have any personal knowledge or prior connections to the subject.

Pair students off and ask the question: “Why do you think it is important to protect endangered species?” Each partner will take turns talking uninterrupted for 30 seconds answering this question. When the first partner is done speaking, the second partner will summarize what the first partner has said for 30 seconds. Once the first round has been completed, the other partner will have a chance to talk uninterrupted and the first partner will repeat back what their partner said.

Come back together as a class and write down any questions they may have regarding endangered species, or things they already know.

Since the majority of your class may not be familiar with Borneo and Sumatra, it might be helpful to refer to a map prior to watching the movie:



World map showing Borneo's location.



This map outlines orangutan distribution from *About Orangutans*, 2017.

There are many activities that can be completed in regards to The Person of the Forest. The filmmakers strengthen their argument for the conservation and protection of orangutans by demonstrating that orangutans have a culture and likening the orangutan population to humans. One way to have your class track the filmmaker’s argument is to have them record notes throughout the movie. Ask each student to get out a piece of paper and fold it into thirds. They will then divide it into three separate labeled columns. It will look something like this:

EXAMPLE OF THE ORANGUTAN’S CULTURE	HOW ARE ORANGUTANS LIKE HUMANS	PURPOSE

While watching the film, ask students to write examples from The Person of the Forest to support the filmmakers argument that orangutans need to be protected. During the film, students will only fill out the two left columns.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/CATEGORIES

GENERAL/OPEN PROMPTS

1. Do you think that it was effective to show that orangutans have culture? Did learning that they make pillows to sleep help to persuade you of the importance of their conservation? What other strategies like this did the filmmaker use?
2. What differences and similarities are there between humans and orangutans?

EXPLORING SELF

1. Richard Wrangham, Professor of Biological Anthropology from Harvard, states in The Person of the Forest: “Culture means so much to humans, so almost everything we do is cultural. Both with feeding traditions and social traditions, you see things that are inherited from mother to child, or sometimes adopted from friend to friend that show that behavior has got this wonderful flexibility, adaptability that is so much a characteristic of humans that is seen in the great apes.”

Think about all of the activities you participate in throughout the day. Write a list and compare to a peer. What is similar and different about your schedules? Could the similarities be defined as culture (shared beliefs of a civilization)? How many cultural groups do you belong to (family, friends, school)

2. It is very apparent from The Person of the Forest that Cheryl Knott and her husband are passionate about what they do. What activities are you passionate about? What makes you want to get out of bed at 3 a.m.?

EXPLORING THE WORLD

1. In The Person of the Forest, Cheryl Knott states: “You can’t protect what you don’t know, we can’t all go to Borneo or Sumatra, we can’t all go to the rainforest there, so we can bring the rainforest to people through media coverage.” Do apps like Google Earth help with habitat conservation?

EXPLORING FILMMAKING

1. In what ways do you think this documentary was effective in showing that we need to help protect orangutans?
2. It is not until 13 minutes into The Person of the Forest that the filmmaker explains that orangutans are in danger because of habitat loss. Why do you think they waited 13 minutes to introduce this?



SENSE OF WONDER

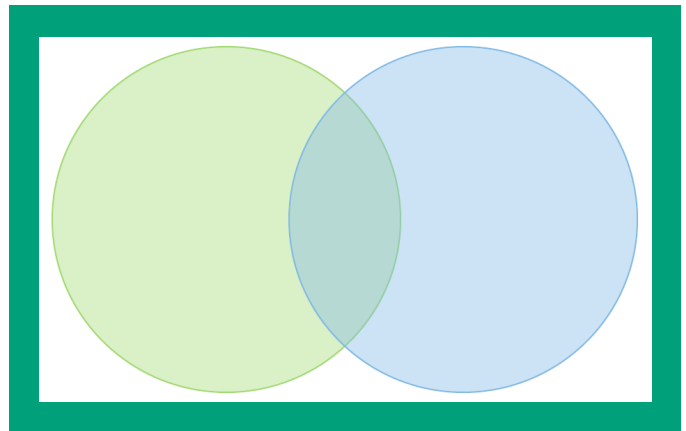
1. The Jane Goodall Institute partnered with Google Earth to take people on a tour of Tanzania's Gombe National Park to show insight into her work with chimpanzees.

(<https://earth.google.com/web/@-4.66243556,29.62914035,0a,1000d,35y,0h,0t,0r/data=Cj8SPRIgMTA2NTQ0Mzg0ZWZmMTFINmI2MTYxOWZkN2FmNGM1ZTAaGUdwb2RhbGwslEdvbWJlIGFuZCBHb29nbGU>)

Is this an extension of a museum? Is it an effective way to help persuade people that habitat and animal conservation is important? Will this type of digital tourism replace traditional tourism eventually? What are the potential benefits and drawbacks to this type of tourism?

ACTIVITIES

If you chose to have students take notes during the film, have them partner off and compare notes with a peer. They will then work together to define the purpose column.



(i.e. answering why the filmmaker chose to include this information). Then come together as a class to discuss whether or not this was an effective strategy chosen by the filmmaker. To take this activity a step further, you could create a whole class venn-diagram comparing humans to orangutans to compare and contrast the differences between our species.

SOME OTHER SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES THAT ALIGN WITH THE MESSAGE OF THE PERSON OF THE FOREST ARE:

The Gunung Palung Orangutan Project website has a great deal of information that is helpful to supporting The Person of the Forest. For this activity, students will be reading more in-depth about orangutans through this article: <http://savegorangutans.org/orangutans/>

– Divide students up into eight groups and give each group a blank poster. Assign each group a different header for the article (taxonomy & distribution, environment, general description, activity patterns, feeding ecology, social system, reproduction and life history, cognition & tool use). Each section of the group will be only responsible for reporting information from their assigned section.

– Ask the groups to divide the paper into three sections: summary, visualize, and questions. It should look something like this:

SUMMARY	VISUALIZE	QUESTIONS



- Students then read only their assigned section. Give an allotted amount of time (around 15 minutes total) for students to read section and complete the poster.
- When everyone has completed the poster, have the groups present the information to the class.

Your class will pretend as though they are applying for a National Geographic Young Explorer grant to help to protect and research other endangered species. Break up class into equal groups and have them visit <https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/directory> together. This is a comprehensive list from the World Wildlife Fund of endangered species. Each group will select an animal from the “critically endangered” list. Their poster should be divided into four sections: name of animal, description of animal, threats to the animal, and why they matter. Their poster should look something like this:

NAME OF ANIMAL	THREATS TO ANIMAL
DESCRIPTION OF ANIMAL	WHY THEY MATTER

- Students will have allotted time to complete poster as group. If group is having trouble getting started, assign each member a different section to research on the website.
- When they have completed poster, names will go on the back of the poster. Hang them up around classroom.
- Students will participate in a “gallery walk” to vote on who should receive the National Geographic Young Explorer Grant. Each student receives three sticky notes, which they will vote with. Students should be asked to remain completely quiet for the “gallery walk” so that they cannot persuade peers with their opinion. They are also not allowed to vote on their own poster. When a student votes, ask them to write something they liked about the groups poster and stick it to the poster.
- Give students around three minutes to vote and then review as a class whose project was awarded the National Geographic Young Explorer Grant.
- If this is something that students are interested in pursuing, here is more information on the application process and current grantees: <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/explorers/grants-programs/young-explorers>

EXIT TICKET

List the vocabulary words on the board (culture, extinct, endangered, conservation, habitat). Ask students to create a summary of Person of the Forest in pairs or alone using all of the vocabulary words. They will record their work on a sticky note and share with the class or with teacher before leaving for the day.

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