

Sumatran Orangutan Health Protocols and Guidelines for Visitors to the Bukit Lawang Eco-tourism Site

As you trek through the forest at Bukit Lawang, it is important to remember that you are entering the habitat of one of the rarest great ape species on Earth.

The population of Sumatran orangutans at Bukit Lawang is from two different origins:

1. Ex-captive individuals who have been rehabilitated and released in the forest. Captive and rehabilitation experiences often result in released rehabilitant orangutans not fearing humans and even expecting to interact with them.
2. Wild individuals, some of whom have become habituated to human presence, with the remaining being naïve (i.e. not used to people's presence in their forest habitat).

Inappropriate behaviour by visitors may affect the behaviour and health of orangutans from both populations negatively, which places them at increased risk of becoming stressed and falling ill. By following these simple guidelines, visitors are able to see the Sumatran orangutans at Bukit Lawang in a way which is both safe for themselves and safe for the orangutans, whilst at the same time, experiencing a more natural, unique experience in the forest.

Group Responsibilities

- A maximum group size of seven visitors is to be adhered to whilst in the forest. Research from other eco-tourist sites that allow great ape trekking has shown that visitor group size can affect the behaviour of the great apes encountered and (as a result), the visitors' experience. Where groups of visitors are too high in number, the animals become stressed and nervous and move away from visitor groups.
- Every member of a visitor group should maintain a minimum distance of TEN METERS from the closest orangutan. The potential for disease transfer, both humans to orangutan and orangutan to human, is very high due to the close genetic relationship humans share with great apes. Pneumonia, influenza, tuberculosis, hepatitis A, B, C, and E, cholera, herpes, parasites, and even the common cold can all be passed between great apes and humans.
 - This distance serves to protect visitors from the possibility of attack by orangutans. This is a real factor in ex-captive orangutans, since most are not afraid of humans after having lived as human captives and being rehabilitated by humans; it is not a serious concern with wild orangutans.
If an orangutan moves towards a visitor group or any member of the group, it is primarily the responsibility of the guide to move the whole visitor group back (maintaining the minimum distance at all times). Every member of a visitor group should nonetheless move away from any orangutan that approaches, and alert others of the approach.
- Once in the presence of orangutans (less than 50 metres away, the distance at which orangutans are considered to be associating with one another), visitors may stay NO LONGER THAN ONE HOUR. The visit will be formally timed from the point of entering the orangutans' presence. When this period is over, the group is to leave the area that the orangutan is in.
 - Timing is the guide's responsibility and the viewing period can NOT be extended.

- Remember that visitors are guests in the Gunung Leuser National Park, which is the orangutans' home, and that what is best for the orangutans is to freely roam and forage naturally in the forest without excessive disturbance.

Orangutan Viewing

Sumatran orangutans share over 96.5% of its genetic DNA with humans and as a result they are like us in many ways. It is important to remember that orangutans are highly intelligent, thinking, feeling beings and should be treated with due care and respect. Visitors to the Bukit Lawang site are to observe the following 'orangutan etiquette' guidelines:

- Visitors should not touch the orangutans under any circumstances. Touching is very dangerous, for various reasons: diseases, infections and even parasites can easily pass between orangutans and humans and physical contact makes the likelihood of this higher. Touching also gives the orangutans the chance to grab; some of them do, with all four hands, typically to steal food or other goods. A mature orangutan is approximately four times stronger than a human and can inflict serious or fatal injuries if they feel threatened, irritated or upset.
 - Binoculars may be useful because they allow close up views of orangutans from safe distances. Please do not use binoculars unless orangutans are relaxed, and stop using them if orangutans show signs of becoming uneasy. Binocular lenses pointed at an orangutan can look like "big eyes", and orangutans sometimes seem to find this uncomfortable.
 - Camera usage must also follow the same guidelines for binoculars. Camera lenses may often be larger than those of binoculars and thus may irritate the orangutans. Also limit the use of flash photography as this may also affect the orangutans.
- Visitors must not feed the orangutans under any circumstances.
- Visitors should not under any circumstances move to or stay in a location that puts them between two orangutans, especially a mother and her infant or a male and his female consort. Orangutan mothers are extremely protective of their young and can become aggressive if they feel that their infant is being threatened. Male orangutans can become aggressive if anyone approaches their consort, and may threaten, chase or even attack.
- Visitors or guides should not call out to the orangutans or otherwise lure them to change their behaviour. Calling or luring the orangutans can cause stress and it automatically disrupts natural behaviour.
- Visitors should refrain from making any sudden movements and should not attempt to gain the attention of the orangutans by waving their arms, etc., for the same reasons given above. In addition to disrupting their behaviour, this can annoy orangutans and evoke threats or more serious aggression.
- Visitors should refrain from making too much noise within the forest and try to talk quietly. Loud noise can be interpreted as a threat by the orangutans and they can respond either by fleeing or threatening back.
 - If an orangutan begins to make kiss-squeak vocalisations, throaty grunts or growls, or "raspberry" sounds, breaking and throwing branches, or shakes trees, these are signs of irritated disturbance and aggressive threats. It is best to move on and leave the orangutan alone.

Visitor Responsibilities

- Visitors must not enter the forest if they are feeling unwell or recently had an illness and/or diarrhoea. It is each visitor's moral responsibility to report any sign of disease to their guide before entering the forest. Spending time around the orangutans whilst unwell can seriously risk infecting them, which could easily result in their death – and has, in the past. Any orangutan infected by humans could potentially infect other orangutans as well.
 - If the guide feels that a visitor is not well enough to enter the forest, it is within his/her authority to refuse entry to the visitor.
- No food should be brought into the forest by visitors. If necessary (for longer-term treks or in special cases), all food should be carried by the guide for safe-keeping.
 - Eating or even having food visible whilst in the forest increases the risk of both disease transmission and attacks from orangutans. One of the main reasons that orangutans contact and attack humans is to steal food, and seeing food is therefore a major provocation. If no food is brought in, the orangutans will learn that there is nothing to attack for, which will make a safer experience for ALL of the orangutans and ALL future visitors and guides.
- Visitors should take any litter they have out of the forest when they leave.
 - This includes fruit skins as discarded foods may later attract orangutans and allow for disease transfer
 - It is most preferable to bring as little as possible into the forest, only the essentials should be taken in. This will limit chances of loss/damage.
 - Refrain from smoking in the forest. Smoking is NOT permitted when in the presence of orangutans.
- If the visitor needs to defecate within the forest, he/she must ensure that it is away from the orangutans and that a hole is dug (at least 30cm deep) and subsequently filled in. Where possible, visitors should try and wait until they are out of the forest.

Forest Responsibilities

Like any tropical forest, Bukit Lawang and its surrounding areas represent a complicated and diverse (but above all, fragile) habitat. The whole forest system is a delicately balanced network of animal and plant species and many species are heavily dependent upon one-another. We therefore ask visitors to follow this simple guideline:

- Visitors should not remove, damage, or alter any of the vegetation within the forest. Leaves, seeds and shells all play a role within the forest ecosystem and should not be taken out.

It is the responsibility of every person entering the forest to help ensure the survival of this *critically endangered* species and its habitat. Visitors should discourage other members in their party, including their guides, from acting in a way which contradicts these guidelines, and should express their disapproval and report to the national park office any activity which puts either the visitors or the orangutans at risk.

With your help and cooperation, the orangutan can continue to flourish in Bukit Lawang, and visitors for years to come will also be able to enjoy and appreciate them in their natural forest home.