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## Great Ape Trust signs first international Memorandum of Understanding

*Alliance with university in Indonesia will broaden opportunities  
for students to study orangutans in the wild, bolster conservation efforts*

Des Moines, Iowa – February 6, 2008 – Great Ape Trust of Iowa has signed its first international Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), a pact with *Universitas Nasional* in Jakarta, Indonesia, that will broaden opportunities for U.S. students to study rapidly disappearing orangutans in the wild and bolster efforts for their conservation.

[Dr. Rob Shumaker](#), director of orangutan research, signed the document on behalf of Great Ape Trust in January after he and one of his scientific colleagues, [Dr. Serge Wich](#), traveled to the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Wich is one of three co-directors of orangutan research at [Ketambe Research Center](#), the longest-running field study site for orangutans in Sumatra. Ketambe is located entirely in the Gunung Leuser National Park, and is therefore part of the government-protected Sumatran Rainforest World Heritage Site and the Leuser Ecosystem. About 90 percent of 6,700 critically endangered Sumatran orangutans (*Pongo abelii*) are found in the Leuser Ecosystem.

Based on the principles of mutual respect and a desire to enhance academic cooperation toward increasing research, awareness and, ultimately, the odds for

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orangutan survival in Sumatra, the MOU will provide a variety of opportunities for students, not only from the United States, but also from around the world.

Great Ape Trust already funds the work of two graduate students from Indonesia who are working at the Ketambe Research Center, one at the 100 percent level, and the other in conjunction with the University of California at Santa Cruz and Utrecht University in the Netherlands, where Wich was formerly affiliated. Other students working alongside their Indonesian peers at Ketambe are from the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Japan, Switzerland and Portugal.

“This isn’t just one-way,” Shumaker said. “We are very hopeful this will offer mutual opportunities, for some students from the U.S. to go to Indonesia, and for some students from Indonesia to come to Great Ape Trust. It’s a two-way mechanism.”

Shumaker said the agreement with *Universitas Nasional* and other similar partnerships significantly boost Great Ape Trust’s ability to further assist students in their academic careers, both financially and in less tangible ways, such as through the mentorship Wich provides after years of research at the Ketambe site. Other partnerships in place include a Memorandum of Agreement reached in 2007 with Iowa State University to create the world’s pre-eminent collaboration for primate studies; an MOU with the Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study, a research organization at George Mason University that seeks to expand understanding of the mind, brain and intelligence; and an MOU with Simpson College, located just a few miles away from The Trust in Indianola. Those partnerships are strengthened by the MOU with the university in Jakarta.

“This is very much an international effort, and many, many students are benefiting. The resources and funding for students are crucial, but importantly, we are influencing students in other ways, such as mentorship and academic advising,” Shumaker said. “It’s a phenomenal experience.”

The agreement with the university in Jakarta also enhances Great Ape Trust’s reputation internationally, giving the scientific research center in southeast Des Moines credibility as a partner in the global orangutan conservation effort. “This is not just lip service,” Shumaker said. “This a meaningful collaboration with an internationally respected university in Southeast Asia.”

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MOUs are not extended as a matter of course, and a limited number of organizations and institutions have MOUs with *Universitas Nasional* in Jakarta, Wich pointed out.

Southeast Asia's only great ape, orangutans are caught in a brutal downward spiral caused by deforestation, illegal poaching and the illegal pet trade, Wich said. The Sumatran orangutan population has declined at a rate of 80 percent over the past 75 years, according to the [World Conservation Union](#), and if the downward trend continues, the species could become the first type of great ape to become extinct in modern times.

Shumaker and Wich pointed to opportunities for scientific inquiry in Ketambe that don't exist elsewhere. The research center is home to one of the best-studied populations of any type of great ape anywhere in the world. Data have been collected continuously since the early 1970s on locomotion, fruit feeding and other aspects of their diet, social interaction, offspring and other aspects of orangutan behavior.

The Ketambe Research Center is located along the Alas River, where the forest abuts the river's edge. Illegal logging and other encroachments to the south and east have pushed the forest some way from the river's banks. Fortunately for the orangutans who live in the area, Ketambe is located in a relatively mountainous area with some lowland forests – topography that is ill-suited for agricultural purposes, such as the vast oil palm plantations that have consumed many thousands of hectares of orangutan habitat, but is suitable for smaller-scale agriculture, said Wich, who has helped the World Conservation Union track population trends for its annual Red List of Threatened Species and is chairman of the scientific commission of the United Nations Environmental Programme's [GRASP](#), or Great Apes Survival Project.

There is cause for some cautious optimism, Wich believes. For example, the government of Aceh, the province in which Ketambe is located and an area of worldwide importance for biodiversity, made permanent a temporary logging moratorium. That and other conservation actions have offered some breathing room for orangutans and those working to stem the tide toward extinction, he said.

However, the ongoing conservation challenges are never far from sight – or earshot. “Human encroachment comes right up to the river,” Shumaker remarked. “You could hear truck horns on the road on the other side while watching orangutans.”

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Though the situation for orangutans is dire, the trip offered some invigorating moments for the scientists. One was the opportunity to observe three generations of an orangutan family – Pluis, who was estimated to be 7 in 1971 when Ketambe was established, her daughter and her daughter's infant – as they traveled about the forest.

Though they didn't witness the behavior first-hand, the scientists were intrigued by video recorded by Madeleine Hardus, one of the graduate students doing research at Ketambe, of a mature female orangutan named Yet sharing with her daughter a meal of a slow loris (*Nycticebus coucang*), a small primate, that she had caught. First, it is rare for female orangutans to share their food source with their offspring, and second, though it is not unheard of for orangutans to eat other vertebrates, neither is it common.

The loris would have provided a rich source of protein, fat and calories and could have been consumed over a period of hours, thus saving energy. The behavior is “perfectly in tune with the origins of meat-eating in humans,” Shumaker said, and also is “perfectly consistent with other innovative behaviors of orangutans.”

Scientists are eager to see if the behavior continues in Yet's offspring. “If this becomes a normal behavior for this daughter, it's opportunistic – a perfect example showing how innovation emerges and then spreads,” Shumaker said.

Another highlight for the scientists was watching orangutans moving through the trees and planning and anticipating their next moves. “It looked like the forest was moving around them,” Shumaker said, “rather than them moving throughout it.”

On another occasion, he observed as a grown orangutan climbed to the top of a tree, about 60 yards in the air, and pulled herself up on small branches that to the human eye seemed incapable of supporting her weight. That is valuable information for Shumaker as he plans enrichment activities for orangutans with the anticipated spring opening of Great Ape Trust's nearly 4-acre yard, which will be one of the largest outdoor yards for orangutans in North America. The goal is to provide an outdoor environment that is close as possible to what orangutans would encounter in the wild.

“The mistake we make in captivity is to provide only giant tree trunks and branches when they need more flexible, swinging things as well,” he said.

Used fire hoses, suspended throughout the orangutans indoor and outdoor facilities at Great Ape Trust, could be strategically placed in the yard to simulate the

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vines orangutans find in the wild, Shumaker said. Future buildings could feature construction similar to that found in rappelling walls, which will allow scientists to study orangutans as they use both their feet and their hands in locomotion.

## ***GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND***

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). To learn more about Great Ape Trust of Iowa, go to [www.GreatApeTrust.org](http://www.GreatApeTrust.org).

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**Insights Through Collaborations with Apes**