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TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF SABAH'S SUNDA CLOUDED LEOPARD – AND HOW THE MALAYSIAN PALM OIL INDUSTRY IS PLAYING A VITAL ROLE

Foo Yuen Ng^{*1}, Ruslan Abdullah¹, Senthivel Nathan², Kalyana Sundram¹

1. Introduction

The Malaysian palm oil industry has been actively involved in the country's conservation efforts, through MPOC's Malaysian Palm Oil Wildlife Conservation Fund (MPOWCF). The funding has also enabled MPOC to spearhead numerous conservation initiatives in Sabah since 2008, ranging from the formation and funding of Sabah Wildlife Department's Wildlife Rescue Unit (WRU), the orangutan population aerial survey, to the establishment of the Bornean Elephant Sanctuary ¹.

In addition to MPOC's efforts, Malaysian plantation companies are also equally active in these conservation endeavours. For example, Yayasan Sime Darby has contributed RM3.96 million for the research on the Sunda clouded leopard, proboscis monkey and Bornean banteng in Sabah ².

This funding has enabled the Danau Girang Field Centre (DGFC) and Sabah Wildlife Department (SWD) to conduct a detailed research on the Sunda clouded leopard, which led to the organisation of the Sunda clouded leopard conservation workshop in mid-June 2017 ^{3,4}. Yayasan Sime Darby has also funded a conservation project on the proboscis monkey in Sabah, which led to the drafting of the State Action Plan for the Proboscis Monkey.

2. Sunda Clouded Leopard Action Plan

Unlike Sabah's more well-known endangered species of orangutans and Bornean elephants, not much concerted efforts to promote the conservation of the Sunda clouded leopard

have happened, until recently. Sabah is now stepping up its efforts to protect the species through this (Sunda clouded leopard) workshop, which was organised by SWD and DGFC, together with its research partners ^{3,4}.

Keywords

Sunda clouded leopard, Malaysian palm oil, wildlife conservation, action plan, stakeholders engagement, MPOWCF
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Email: michael@mpoc.org.my

*Corresponding Author

¹ Malaysian Palm Oil Council

² Sabah Wildlife Department

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Figure 1: The Sunda Clouded Leopard



Photo credit: Rudi Delvaux/DGFC

During the workshop, results of DGFC and SWD's extensive 5-year study on the Sunda clouded leopards in Sabah were shared amongst participants. This was done to facilitate constructive recommendations for the conservation of the clouded leopards. The study had earlier collected crucial information on the clouded leopards' demography, behaviour and landscape ecology.

The workshop showed that the key to increase the survival of the Sunda clouded leopard is to maintain and enhance the connectivity between fragmented forested habitats, by retaining and increasing the forest cover. Important recommendations that arose from the workshop include ⁵:

- i. Drafting a 10-year plan to oversee the implementation of the state action plan
- ii. Conducting toolkit training for Sabah Wildlife Department and Sabah Forestry Department

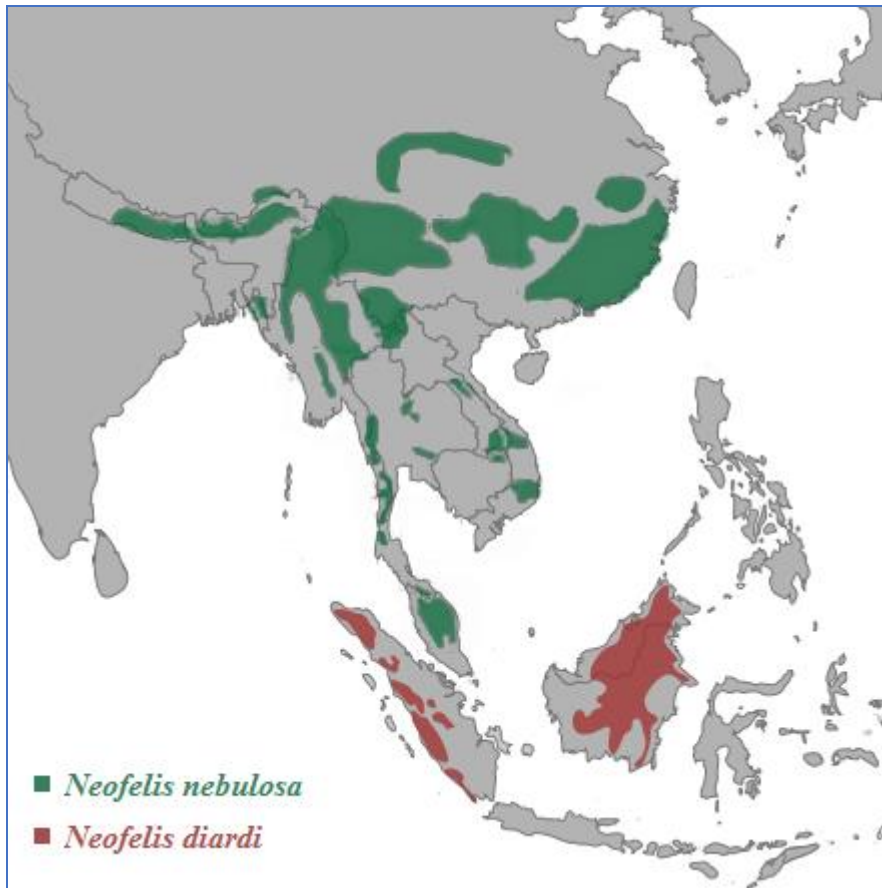
- iii. Setting up systematic patrolling to curb poaching
- iv. Identifying proposed development in areas with conservation value
- v. Establishing guidelines for the stakeholders (including the palm oil industry) to help conserve the species

The proposals and feedbacks here will form the basis of the '*Sunda Clouded Leopard Action Plan*', which will be presented to the Sabah State Government for potential adoption and implementation.

3. About the Sunda Clouded Leopard and Its Conservation Status

There are two species of clouded leopards; the mainland Asia clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*) and the Sunda clouded leopard (*Neofelis diardi*), which is only found in Borneo and Sumatra ^{6,7,8}. These wild cat species are the smallest of the big cats and belong to the Felidae family, which includes lions and tigers.

Figure 2: Distribution range of the clouded leopards



Source: Clouded Leopard Project website: http://www.cloudedleopard.org/about_main⁸

Figure 3: Sunda clouded leopard profile

- Typical length: 1.3-1.9m long (including tail)
- Typical weight: 11-25 kg
- Litter size: 1-2 cubs
- Diet: Carnivores
- Cloud-like spots on its coat to provide camouflage in forest habitats (Sunda clouded leopard have smaller and darker cloud markings)

Sources: i. The Clouded Leopard Project website,⁸ http://www.cloudedleopard.org/about_main

ii. Cat Specialist Group website⁹, <http://www.catsg.org/index.php?id=225>

For the Sunda clouded leopard, it is estimated that there are around 4,500 mature individuals in Borneo and Sumatra ⁶. It is also estimated that there are around 750 clouded leopards in Sabah, which are found widely in its lowland rainforests ⁵. Its current conservation status is listed as “*Vulnerable*” in the IUCN Red List and the species is fully protected in both Sabah and Sarawak ⁶. The other totally protected mammals in Sabah include the Sumatran rhinoceros, Bornean elephant, orangutan, sun bear, banteng and proboscis monkey.

4. Human Wildlife Conflicts and Threats to Sunda Clouded Leopard’s Survival

Due to its elusive nature, there has been little human-wildlife conflicts associated with the Sunda clouded leopard. SWD’s records show that the species is only involved in 1% of the human-wildlife conflicts in Sabah recently, as compared to macaques (35%), elephants (23%) and crocodiles (10%) (Figure 4) ¹⁰.

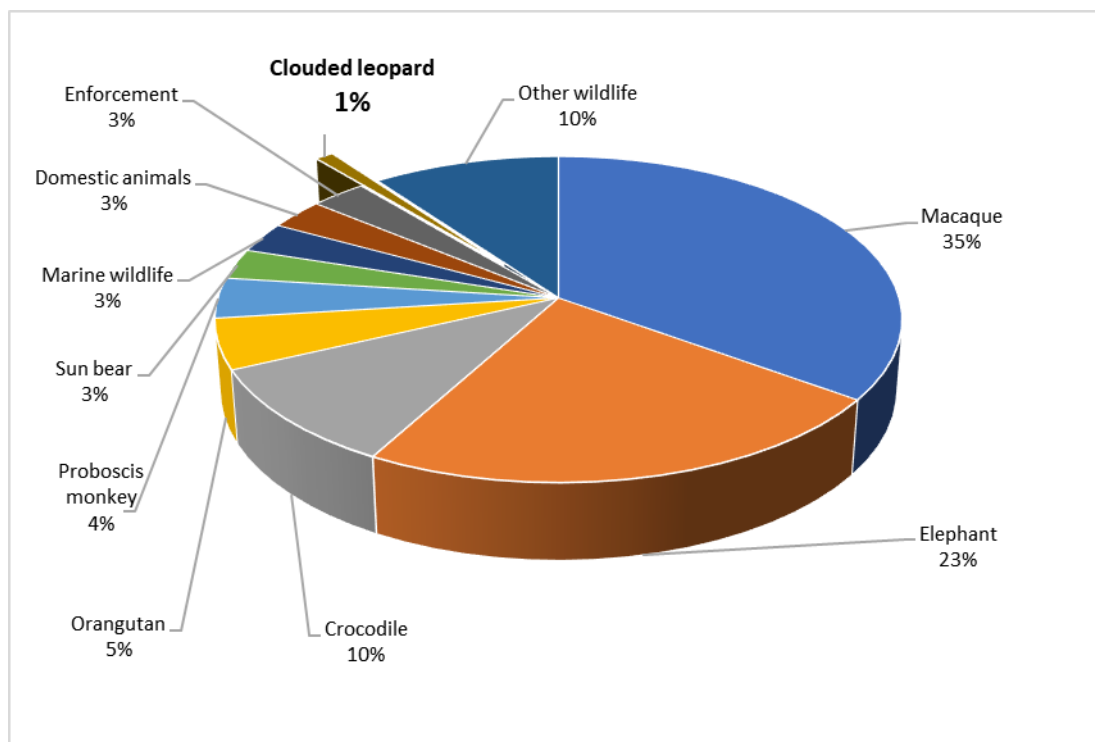
A recent article by Mongabay, an environmental science and conservation news website (*‘A clouded future: Asia’s enigmatic clouded leopard threatened by palm oil’*) has even named palm oil as the main threat to the

clouded leopard’s survival ¹¹. However, this is not entirely correct.

Globally, it is estimated that there are fewer than 10,000 mature individuals of both the mainland Asia and Sunda clouded leopards ^{6,7,12}. The mainland Asia clouded leopards (*Neofelis nebulosa*) are mostly found on mainland Southeast Asia (Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam), Nepal and China. Here, the main threats to its population are habitat loss due to increasingly fragmented forests and poaching for the illegal wildlife trade, especially in China, Thailand and Myanmar ^{7,12}.

The clouded leopard species which is only found in Borneo and Sumatra (Sunda clouded leopard / *Neofelis diardi*, estimated to be around 4,500 mature individuals), is threatened by deforestation and habitat fragmentation, agriculture and oil palm plantations, as well as anthropogenic development (roads, bridges and human settlements). The species is also facing an increasing threat from poaching and trade in Sabah ^{3,5,6}.

Figure 4: Human Wildlife Conflicts in Sabah



Source: Sabah Wildlife Department ¹⁰

However, the Mongabay article rightly pointed out that the palm oil industry will continue to grow in Malaysia, as it is an essential component to its development plans. As a developing country, Malaysia is consistently experiencing development to generate sufficient economic returns to sustain the welfare and livelihood of its people.

Sabah and Sarawak too need to ensure that their growing population, including small farmers and their families are provided decent living standards, from which commodities like oil palm are providing. Here, it is important to note that the increase of oil palm plantations in Malaysia does not come at the expense of wanton deforestation, as plantations are complying to the voluntary Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certification, and the now mandatory Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) standards^{13,14}, which forbids plantings on high biodiversity value areas, including primary forests and protected areas.

5. Stakeholder Engagements and Collaborations as the Way Forward

Therefore, to have a sustainable conservation programme for the clouded leopards, the only way forward here is to have the stakeholders working towards a common goal. This entails the government, palm oil industry and conservationists working together to ensure that the delicate balance between development and conservation can be achieved.

In Malaysia, the Malaysian palm oil industry has been involved in the conservation of the Sunda clouded leopard since 2011 (through Yayasan Sime Darby's funding). A total of RM3.96 million was committed to undertake research on three species, namely the Sunda clouded leopard, Proboscis monkey and the Bornean banteng².

Through this funding, four clouded leopards have been collared in order to gather information on their movements and home range estimates. The recent workshop in Sabah was organised to disseminate the research information collected, as well as to seek more collaborations between the government agencies, Malaysian palm oil industry and conservationists, to further strengthen the existing efforts. The palm oil industry will be involved in these

collaborations, especially in proposals to curb poaching and the establishment of conservation guidelines for the industry.

MPOC, via the MPOWCF is thankful that its engagements with the Sabah Wildlife Department and the Danau Girang Field Centre has resulted in notable conservation programmes, such as the Wildlife Rescue Unit, the Bornean Elephant Sanctuary and the conservation of the Bornean banteng¹. We look forward to more meaningful multi-stakeholder partnerships in Malaysia, and hope that more Malaysian palm oil companies will come forward and support these endeavours.

6. Acknowledgement

The expert advice of both Dr. Benoit Goossens, Director, Danau Girang Field Centre (DGFC) and Dr. Senthilvel Nathan, Assistant Director, Sabah Wildlife Department in formulating this article is gratefully acknowledged.

Footnotes

- i. Under Sabah Wildlife Department's WRU's rescue and translocation operations, it has rescued and translocated four clouded leopards since its inception in 2010.
- ii. Previous Species Action Plans that have been formulated in Sabah include the State Action Plans for the Orangutan, Elephant and the Rhinoceros (2012-2016), where MPOC was one of the stakeholders involved¹⁵.
- iii. MPOWCF was launched in 2006 with an initial funding of Ringgit Malaysia (RM) 20 million, of which RM10 million is a grant from the Malaysian government and the balance of RM10 million is provided by the palm oil industry. The Fund is administered by the Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC), which has the overall responsibility to manage the various conservation projects funded through MPOWCF. Funds are provided for execution of projects and studies on wildlife, biodiversity and environmental conservation while factoring the overall impact of the palm oil industry on these parameters. The MPOWCF also accepts contributions from independent donors. For every ringgit contributed by an independent donor, MPOC will top it up with another ringgit, that is, on 1:1 basis.

Figure 5: Sabah's Species Action Plan for Bornean Elephant, Rhinoceros and Orangutan



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