

Birute Galdikas: The Professor of the Red Apes

"I DON'T ENJOY giving interviews," Birute Galdikas, EARTHWATCH principal investigator for the Orangutan Project, is saying. Indeed, she seems uncharacteristically ill at ease. She squirms in her chair and fidgets with an unlit cigarette.

Galdikas has no good reason to feel uncomfortable. It's 95 degrees (in the shade) and the humidity stands at 85 percent. She's nursing fire-ant bites, and the mosquitoes are especially abundant, but basically things are as they always are and have been for the past 14 years in the Tanjung Puting Reserve on the island of Borneo in Indonesia.

Along with her husband and two of her three children, Galdikas lives in a small but ample wooden bungalow. At one end of the very rustic living-dining room her three-year-old son Frederick frolics with his toys. The shelves overflow with a combination of scientific volumes and children's books. Above Galdikas is a framed poster of an orangutan, the least known and most endangered of all the great apes—the animal she traveled halfway around the world to study.

She pops out of her chair and opens the back door. "Isn't the light beautiful today? And listen to those birds." She leaves the door open and sips her coffee. "I've always been interested in animals and human history. Trying to understand where we came from has forever been a passion of mine. It seems to be clear that we humans, before we entered the savannahs of this earth, must have left the tropical rain forest. So I was interested in learning about the one great ape still left behind in the rain forest."

The professor, as she prefers to be called, is talking in a sweet and very soft voice. Her gentle features mask her 39 years. She's still using the unlit cigarette as a prop, gesturing with it occasionally to punctuate a sentence or to point to a framed poster promoting a lecture she once presented at the Chicago Academy of Sciences with fellow primatologists Dian Fossey and Jane Goodall.

STEVE DALE



Birute Galdikas with orangutan at her camp in Borneo.

"Louis Leakey gave us our starts," she says. "I don't think it's a coincidence that we're all women. Leakey believed women are more patient and observant than men. I think I agree. Increasingly, primatologists are women. Also, this is not a get-rich-quick job. Men tend to seek career advancement. Well, I'm here in Borneo and there's no promotion in sight. This is it."

Galdikas first arrived on the island with her former spouse, Rod Brindamour. They were surprised to find orangutans still being kept as pets throughout Indonesia despite the fact that it was against the law to do so.

"Rod deserves a medal for his work," she says. "We physically confiscated the animals, finally ending the orangutan trade. The first Indonesian phrase Rod learned was, 'This officer is here with me so we can confiscate this orangutan.'"

The former pets were ill-equipped to be released into the rain forest, and so Galdikas's camp became a halfway house

for orangutans. Dozens of the red apes commute between the forest and the camp, where shelter and food are provided. Eventually, some animals are able to revert back to the wild.

Brindamour spent much of those first years chasing loggers out of Tanjung Puting. Galdikas finally lights her cigarette.

"More than anything," she says, "I'm proud that we saved this national park. And by continuing to live here, we safeguard it. Last year we caught 97 loggers."

After 7½ years in Borneo, however, Brindamour yearned to return to North America. Their son Binti joined him. "My life was here," says Galdikas. "My goal is to learn about the life history of orangutans. I suspect their life expectancy is sixty years. There are so many questions yet to be answered."

She stayed in Borneo and eventually married a prominent local Indonesian. Their children are bilingual and bicultural. Born in Wiesbaden, Germany and raised in Canada, Galdikas is about five-foot-seven—not

especially tall for a Western woman. But she towers over most Indonesians, including her husband.

When the professor arrived in Tanjung Puting little was known about the mysterious orangutan. "I was most surprised to learn how much bark they eat," she says, "and at certain times of the year how little fruit they consume. For months they gorge themselves on insects. It was an EARTHWATCH group [Team VIII, 1984] who witnessed orangutans eating meat. That had never been seen in the wild before. It was perhaps our most dramatic revelation ever."

Galdikas says her EARTHWATCH volunteers are indispensable. "People have no idea how much paperwork is involved in any scientific project. And it's true: if you don't publish, you perish. I don't know how I'd find the time if it wasn't for the volunteers taking data and photographs."

Despite her 14 years of research and writing, Galdikas claims little credit for popularizing orangs. "Clint Eastwood is the hero," she says. Eastwood costarred with an orangutan named Clyde in the movie *Every Which Way But Loose* in 1978, and again two years later in *Any Which Way You Can*.

"The second movie was wonderful," she says. "I'll never forget when Eastwood said to the cop [about Clyde], 'He's his own person; I don't own him.' That was absolutely magnificent. In one sentence that defines the orangutan's character."

The professor begins to laugh. "If I could hire any actor to portray an orangutan in a film I'd cast Lucille Ball or Grace Kelly. Lucy has the red hair and she clowns. Kelly had the cool demeanor. I love the nonchalant gaze out of the corner of her eye. It's the same as an orangutan's."

Though she often returns to North America as a visiting professor at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Indonesia is her home. "It's where I'm most comfortable," says Galdikas. "This is where I'll spend the rest of my life." —STEVE DALE