

Anthropologist or primatologist?

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Abstract

Drawing on two research projects on human-orangutan relationships, I reflect on how methods beyond single-sited ethnography might facilitate research on relationships between humans and other primates (alloprimates). The first project, which examined keeper-orangutan relationships in a zoo, illustrates how combining ethnography and ethology can highlight how humans' interpretations and narrations of animal behaviour depend on their unique position and concerns, such as their role as caregivers. Examining both species' daily lives can also make the research focus more symbolically equitable—though methodological equality remains difficult. The second project used interviews with orangutan conservation practitioners and site visits to examine debates about orangutan rehabilitation and reintroduction (R&R). This multi-sited approach revealed insights that may not have arisen in a single-sited ethnography, such as fundamental methodological and ethical differences between R&R projects. Furthermore, acting as “quasi-primatologists” – through practising ethology, or taking seriously the views of alloprimate advocates – might positively change how social anthropologists are perceived by participants, thereby facilitating access.

Keywords: multispecies ethnography, ethnoprimateology, multi-sited ethnography, comparison, human-primate interactions

1 Introduction

Though non-human animals (hereafter, animals) have featured in anthropology since the discipline's inception, some argue that until recently animals have served largely “anthropocentric” purposes, acting merely as “mirrors and windows” into human social life (Mullin 1999), or as symbols or totems that are “good to think” with (Lévi-Strauss 1963). The emergence of the “animal moment” in recent years (Emel and Wolch 1998, 1), occurring in anthropology and related disciplines, aims to reduce the anthropocentric bias by treating other creatures as agents who are “here to live with” Haraway (2003, 5), and use their agency to shape human societies. To this end, social anthropologists are increasingly conducting “multispecies ethnographies” of human-animal relationships (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010): “ethnographic research and writing that is attuned to life's emergence within a shifting assemblage of agentive beings” (Ogden, Hall and

Tanita 2013, 6). Multispecies ethnography is therefore defined less by its methods, which often resembles what we might call “mono-species ethnography” (though some scholars provide more interdisciplinary definitions, e.g., Rose et al. 2012), and more by its focus on animal agency and human-animal “entanglements” (see Kohn 2007). Yet Ingold (2013, 19) argues that “there is really nothing new” about research “currently parading under the brand-name of ‘multi-species ethnography’”, since animals have been taken seriously as actors in human social systems for decades, such as in his own 1970s research on reindeer and their herders in Finland.

My goal in this paper is not to take a side on whether multispecies ethnography is actually a new approach. Rather, I consider the value of other methods, beyond classic single-sited ethnography, for studying human-animal interfaces, specifically with other primates (alloprimates). Not only might using other methods make multispecies ethnography more genuinely “new” in the eyes of sceptics, but other methods also hold certain advantages. In particular, I focus on methods from two projects on human-orangutan relationships, the first employing a combination of ethnography and ethology, and the second a multi-sited ethnographic approach. A common theme between both projects was my status as a quasi-primatologist, which had interesting and valuable effects on my positionality and access. I therefore argue that for studying human-alloprimate interfaces, social anthropologists would not only benefit from moving beyond the “Malinowskian paradigm” (Marcus 2011, 16), but also from reconsidering disciplinary goals, ethics, and training, in an effort to become a little more like primatologists.

2 Accessing orangutans’ perspectives: the value of ethology

One reason to follow Ingold in thinking that multispecies ethnography is nothing new is that sticking largely to ethnographic methods offers little insight into “the perspective of the animal party to the interaction” (Knight 2005, 10). Thus, although the ethnographer may acknowledge the animal’s agency and importance in shaping human social life, by using only ethnographic methods the work remains focused on how humans respond to animals, rather than the reverse. One way of making research more equitably focused on both species is to combine ethnographic methods with ethological observations of the animals (see Knight 2005; Madden 2010, for this suggestion).

This method is adopted by those who practice “zooethnography” (Parreñas 2012), or “etho-ethnography” (Daly 2018). With alloprimates, similar approaches are sometimes employed by practitioners of “ethnoprimateology”: an approach originating from primate field studies, which combines ethological observations of alloprimates with methods for studying humans like interviews, surveys, and, occasionally, ethnography. Just as social anthropologists justify multispecies ethnography on the grounds that animal agency has been ignored in their discipline, ethnoprimateologists argue that primatology has glossed over extensive anthropogenic effects on primate lives (see

Fuentes 2012; Dore, Riley and Fuentes 2017, for reviews). Given its focus on primates living in anthropogenic landscapes, ethnoprimateology often aims to support conservation efforts (e.g., Fuentes and Wolfe 2002; Lee 2010; Waller 2016). This pro-conservation goal potentially conflicts with social anthropology's usual focus on local people, whose interests may not align with biodiversity conservation (section 5). Furthermore, most ethnoprimateological research "is not heavily ethnographic" (Dore et al. 2018, 7). For these reasons, Leblan (2013) argues that ethnoprimateology is epistemologically distinct from social anthropology's multispecies ethnography, and is "better understood, for now, as the integration of field primatology within conservation biology" rather than as a holistic paradigm spanning anthropological sub-fields. However, ethnoprimateologists are increasingly pushing against this divide, by incorporating ethnography and perspectives from local people into their work,¹ and arguing that ethnoprimateology should move from being "a tool for more effective conservation practice" to become a broader field for examining human-alloprimate entanglements (Robinson and Remis 2018; see also Dore 2018). In a sense, my argument here is the same, but directed at social anthropologists: I propose that much can be gained from taking the perspectives of conservationists seriously, and from incorporating ethological methods from primatology into multispecies ethnography.

In 2012, I examined keeper-orangutan relationships at Auckland Zoo, New Zealand, using a combination of ethnographic and ethological methods: I spent 27 days over the course of several months conducting interviews and participant-observation with the six orangutan keepers, and 102 hours observing a group of four orangutans. An important advantage of this "zooethnographic", or "etho-ethnographic", approach is that it balances the amount of time researchers spend learning about the lives of humans and other animals. According to Parreñas (2012, 13), it is also more respectful towards animal interactants than most multispecies ethnography, since animals are "individuated" rather than considered in aggregate as "multitudes". It can also help highlight how humans understand animal behaviour through the lens of their position, such as their culture or job. For example, I found that keepers worried a great deal about conflict between female orangutans, and sexual relationships between males and females. My ethological observations indicated that conflict and sex were rare – for example, the females of concern rarely interacted, and when they did their interactions were usually neutral or even positive – but these rare events were extremely meaningful from the keepers' perspective, since their ultimate goal was to maintain high welfare standards. As such, discussions of social stress, violence, "rape", and "love" were central to how keepers designed group arrangements and other husbandry practices (e.g., separating females during feeding), such that some rare events were much more significant than more ordinary occurrences (see Palmer, Malone and Park, 2015 for a

1. For example, see contributions in the 2018 special edition of *Folia Primatologica*, "Ethnographic Approaches in Primatology", and Hanson 2017; Malone, Palmer and Wade 2017; Setchell et al. 2017; Dore, Eller and Eller 2018; Wade, Forthcoming.

more detailed discussion, and Byrne 1997 for more on the significance of rare events in primate behaviour).

Anecdotes were important for how I wrote about observations of the orangutans (see Mitchell, Thompson and Miles 1997, for various perspectives on the use of anecdotes in ethology). For example, I observed one full-blown fight between the two females that keepers were concerned about. Merely recording this as one incident of “aggression”, without emphasising the drama of the event or the reactions of keepers, would diminish its importance for shaping keepers’ ideas and husbandry protocols. Similarly, I felt that describing in detail a case of “rape” (see A. L. Rose 1995; Sowards 2011, for discussions of the use of this term in orangutans) would inspire empathy for the female orangutan, rather than minimising her suffering by merely recording the incident as a case of “forced copulation”. However, I concur with Jolly (2011, 240) that it is also crucial to conduct systematic observation and statistical analysis of animal behaviour, rather than solely rely on anecdotes, since quantitative methods allow researchers to consider “what may be typical rather than just individual, what may be verified by other observers . . . rather than just one’s individual self”. In short, although quantitative ethology is not exactly objective, it can act much like reflexivity in social anthropology (Davies 2008) by helping researchers attempt to step outside of their own personal biases.

This approach of using ethology with alloprimates, and ethnography with humans, is fundamentally unequal, since human participants can explain the reasons for their behaviour, whereas researchers must simply interpret orangutan behaviour as best they can. Yet this discrepancy is, arguably, inevitable given the language barrier (Tapper 1988), and differences in cognition between species: as Wittgenstein (1958, 223) famously observed, “if lions could speak, we could not understand them”; similarly, Ingold (1988, 93–94) argues that although bees clearly communicate amongst themselves, a fundamental difference in minds means that “for the would-be participant observer there is simply nothing to participate in”. But orangutans, being closely related to humans, have minds that are not so different to ours, such that Anne Russon (interview quoted in Siegel 2001, 201) suggests that “for the great apes, the proper assumption is anthropomorphism” (see also de Waal 1999). Even so, Russon notes that orangutans “live in a world that is very different to our own”: we can probably therefore have more confidence in our interpretations of other humans’ behaviour than with any other species (see Milton 2005, for further discussion).

Others have, more optimistically, suggested that a kind of ethnographic participant observation might be conducted with other animals (Moore and Hannon 1993; Noske 1997; Mullin 1999). However, precisely what “ethnography” with animals would look like is generally poorly explained (Madden 2014, 287–88). Moore and Hannon (1993) argue that the “empathic” approach employed by some primatologists (e.g., Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, Roger Fouts) resembles participant observation in that nonhuman subjects are treated as social partners whose minds, preferences, and thoughts can be accessed by humans (see also Asquith 2011; Sussman 2011). Similarly, approaches based

on “kinesthetic empathy” – empathetic understanding reached through meaningful imitation or enactment of an animal’s bodily moves (Shapiro 1997) – and “affect” – broadly, “the nonlinguistic, irrational, and bodily aspects of communication” (Solomon 2016, 2) – highlight “intersubjective exchange” between species, which is fundamental to ethnography (Madden 2014, 285). However, I concur with Fine (2004, 642) that if we frame ethnographic studies of human-animal relationships as “dual ethnography” of two species, we must accept the necessity of a “bifurcated epistemology”, such that while we can reasonably trust our depictions of other humans’ thoughts and feelings (the humans can be read “from the inside out”), the same is not true of the animals (they must be read “from the outside in”: see Madden, 2014 for a similar argument).

For this reason, I would argue that we must simply accept that we are in a better position to do ethnography with humans than with other animals, and must therefore use unequal methods to study human and non-human perspectives (see Palmer, Malone and Park 2015). Alternatively, one could simply use ethology for examining both species’ behaviour. This kind of approach is occasionally used for assessing the animal welfare effects of relationships with humans, though the focus remains on how animals behave towards humans rather than species’ responses to each other (see Waiblinger et al. 2006; Hosey 2008; Palmer and Malone 2017, for reviews). If the focus is on both species, interviews and participant observation can, as any textbook on ethnographic methods would attest, give valuable insight into the human perspective. Such an approach was used, for example, by Baeckler (2001) and Daly (2018), who ethologically observed human caregivers when they interacted with chimpanzees, but also conducted ethnography with the caregivers. I therefore propose that refusing to talk with people simply to make one’s approach “equal” amounts to ignoring valuable ethnographic information for a misguided principle.

3 Scientists like us: positionality as a primatologist

Combining ethnography with ethological observations of alloprimates transforms social anthropologists into quasi-primatologists: a status that can have important implications for researcher positionality (i.e., how participants’ perceptions of the researcher may affect results: G. Rose 1997). This became obvious when, during an oral presentation to the Auckland Zoo orangutan keepers about my research results, a keeper elaborated on my proposal that they avoid using “anthropomorphic” language (see Palmer, Malone and Park 2016) by explaining that they do this because they want to seem “professional” in certain contexts, such as at conferences and in front of “scientists” like myself. The fact that I was perceived as a “scientist” – an admission which prompted much laughter, and denial on my part – may therefore have made the keepers’ wariness of anthropomorphic language more obvious, and thereby facilitated the research.

A more dubious consequence of being viewed as a scientist was that keepers may have forgotten about, or not fully comprehended, the importance of ethnography for

my research. For example, one keeper initially sounded somewhat surprised that my results focused so much on them. I had, of course, explained the nature of my ethnographic research before starting the project, and had secured consent from all participants. However, because I spent so much time watching the orangutans, keepers may have forgotten that the orangutans were not my sole focus. Though it was by no means a serious issue – keepers all expressed satisfaction with how they were represented – this incident did highlight a possible ethical risk: conducting ethological observations of animals might leave human participants with the wrong idea about the focus and goals of the research. That said, research participants may equally be surprised by how they appear in classic ethnographies due to the inevitable “division of field and desk – the social and the anti-social” (Mosse 2006, 397), since ethnographers are effectively part of the community during fieldwork, and outsiders when writing. It may nonetheless be advisable for quasi-primatologists to take opportunities to remind their human participants that they are not *just* primatologists, but also ethnographers.

4 Tunnel vision: the value of comparison and multi-sited approaches

Fieldwork for the second project took place between 2015 and 2017 and focused on debates about ethics in orangutan rehabilitation (helping orphaned orangutans become healthy, independent of humans, and capable of surviving in the wild) and reintroduction (release into the wild; together, R&R: Beck et al. 2007). Research involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews in person or over Skype/phone with 81 participants, while a further three responded to questions by email, ten participated in short interviews or other correspondence, and seven informally discussed information pertinent to the research. Participants were primarily orangutan conservation practitioners with some decision-making capacity, such as managers at field projects, donors, NGO directors, and researchers. I also attended several meetings of practitioners and visited the majority of orangutan R&R projects in Indonesia and Malaysia; however, participant observation was a secondary method. Because of its multi-sited nature and reliance on interviews, my approach is best described as a multi-sited ethnography: ethnography that “moves from its conventional single-site location [...] to multiple sites of observation and participation” (Marcus 1995, 95). Some anthropologists express “worries” about multi-sited approaches, such as the “dilution” of anthropology’s signature method, a shift in focus from everyday life to the activities of institutions, and an erosion of the technique of “defamiliarization” and culture-specific expertise (Marcus 2011). Candea (2007) adds that restricting one’s field site to an “arbitrary location” can act as a useful tool for challenging the “seed of a totalizing claim to somehow represent ‘everything’”, which is implied in the view that the traditional field site is “too limiting”. Thus, Candea suggests that bounding one’s field site can help “recapture the value of

not knowing certain things”.

And yet, defenders do not necessarily claim that multi-sitedness somehow represents “everything”, just that it can raise issues that would not be visible at one site: the approach therefore allows researchers to ask *different*, rather than *more*, questions than they could at a single location (see contributions in Coleman and Hellermann 2011). In particular, I propose that using multi-sited approaches can help challenge oversimplified categories, particularly when it comes to how animal-focused institutions define themselves. The work of Braverman (2015) provides an excellent illustration of this advantage. Using a very similar methodology to mine (interviews with numerous conservationists and more limited participant observation), Braverman challenges the tidy categorisation of conservation institutions as either “in-situ” or “ex-situ” (i.e., wild or captive), by demonstrating that there is a “growing array of gray sites” (Braverman 2014, 54), which feature complex and variable modes of human-animal interaction. In the same way, I found that adopting a multi-sited approach allowed me to challenge the assumption that orangutan “rehabilitation” projects have, roughly speaking, the same goals and methods.

One clear example was the dramatic difference between Indonesian and Malaysian rehabilitation centres, with the latter almost universally seen not as “true” rehabilitation and therefore often called “cageless zoos” or “sanctuaries”—though neither term, taken in its purest sense, quite fits. While zoos hypothetically “breed [animals] and then move them around as a genetically viable stock”, with the idea of serving as “arks” for threatened species (see Rothfels 2002), sanctuaries “should not breed at all, because what they are there for is to provide good welfare to those individual animals” [Unwin, 2015-12-14]. The Malaysian “rehabilitation centres”, Sepilok and Matang, fell somewhere in between, with several participants explaining that they encourage (but don’t carefully manage) breeding, supposedly for the conservation goal of replenishing dwindling numbers of orangutans in the wild (see also Parreñas 2012; Animal Planet UK 2015; OAUK 2016). Yet the “replenishing the wild” justification for R&R was nearly universally viewed as invalid on Borneo, since “there are still a lot of orangutans in the wild—a lot of viable wild populations [...] A lot of people say that we need reintroduction, but of course it’s not true” (Ancrenaz, 2015-11-06; see also MacKinnon and MacKinnon 1991). The motivation for breeding at Malaysian centres was therefore widely regarded as tourism, not conservation, such that females are transformed into “breeding machines for tourism” [anon]. Many also emphasised that “tourism and rehabilitation are entirely incompatible, under any circumstances” [Robins, 2016-04-08], since the constant presence of visitors undermines the goal of “dehumanization”: making orangutans independent of humans, to avoid cases of released orangutans approaching human settlements, and to make orangutans “fully”, rather than “semi-”, wild (see Rijksen 2001; Russon, Smith and Adams 2016).

The practice of rehabilitation-for-tourism in Malaysia reflects a national effort, begun in the 1990s, to promote nature-based tourism (Marker et al. 2008). Named as

Malaysia's official "mascot", orangutans (especially infants) feature prominently in tourism campaigns (Kaplan 1999). Wildlife management is therefore often conducted for the primary purpose of tourism, with the Sabah Wildlife Department falling under the Sabah Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment (SWD 2017). Along with the two main Malaysian "rehabilitation centres", "rehabilitation" was supposedly also conducted at a resort in Sabah until 2016, when the programme closed under pressure from activists (Friends of the Orangutans Malaysia 2015, 2016)—though those involved represented the closure as "the completion of a successful" rehabilitation programme co-managed with Sepilok (Borneo Post 2016). A project in Peninsular Malaysia also claims to undertake R&R (BMOUIF 2014); however, because orangutans have not inhabited peninsular forests for sixty thousand years (Ibrahim et al. 2013), this too was dismissed by participants as "a big joke. There's no rehabilitation happening. It is a zoo actually" [Singh, 2016-02-10]. Recently, researchers have attempted to justify orangutan releases on the peninsula as "Pleistocene rewilding" (see Louys et al. 2014), though one participant suggested that this too is simply a tourism stunt.

In Indonesia, the situation is quite different. About 81 percent of remaining orangutans live in Indonesia (Utami Atmoko et al. 2017), and populations are in more rapid decline than in Malaysia, perhaps reflecting higher levels of hunting (see Ancrenaz et al. 2004; Meijaard et al. 2011), or more rapid deforestation: Indonesia has recently overtaken Brazil as the nation losing primary forest at the fastest rate, with highest deforestation rates on Sumatra and Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo: Margono et al. 2014). Much of Indonesia's deforestation is for oil palm, particularly in Kalimantan and Aceh (a province in Sumatra where forests were relatively inaccessible until 2005 amidst a separatist civil war: Margono et al. 2012), whereas the palm oil boom reached Malaysia in the 1990s (Gaveau et al. 2016). Indonesia also currently has a friendlier climate for NGOs than Malaysia (see Weiss 2003; Majid Cooke 2006), so by far the majority of orangutan conservation NGOs work in the former.

Effectively anyone with money can start an orangutan R&R project in Indonesia, so long as they refrain from excessively criticising the government and are willing to pay local wildlife officials a "daily fee" [anon] for accompanying them on activities like orangutan releases and confiscations, for which government presence is required. Thus, in Indonesia transnational conservation NGOs have begun to "take over the most basic functions and powers of the state" (Ferguson 2002, 993). While this context means that Indonesian R&R is rarely run for tourism, it also means that R&R is hugely variable. This variability is exacerbated by the lack of post-release monitoring data, which makes it difficult to determine empirically whose method is most effective (Russon 2009). The government does little to oversee or regulate projects, and independent certification bodies, such as the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, remain purely voluntary [Heckman, 2016-11-10]. Donors therefore occasionally attempt to act as regulators, though, as one donor concluded, "there is no pressure from small gifts from the general public to improve things", so "there are really just not enough of us [donors interested

in oversight] to tip the scales". Thus, in Indonesia the situation is, according to pioneer and critic of orangutan rehabilitation Herman Rijksen [2015-12], that "western 'lone wolf' conductors of rehabilitation projects are all convinced of their own 'expertise' ", and "cannot come to a consensus on the methodology".

Disagreements about methods amongst Indonesian projects come down not just to ideas about expertise and efficacy, but also to ethics. To take but one example, practitioners' preferences for "death with dignity in the wild than survival in captivity" (Seal 1991, 44), or vice versa, affect not only ideas about whether lifelong sanctuary care is an acceptable alternative to R&R, but also how practitioners select release candidates. Thus, depending on their ethical stance, their willingness to use scarce space in their centres for lifelong residents, and the degree to which they view psychological and behavioural issues as impediments to release, practitioners may view essentially all orangutans in rehabilitation centres as releasable [Galdikas, 2016-06-16], or more than 50% as "unreleasable", i.e., incapable of surviving in the wild and therefore unable to be released (Trayford 2013). These discrepancies reflect disagreement about the circumstances under which wildness or captivity is preferable from an orangutan's perspective, and whether orangutans' wellbeing is more important than granting them "freedom" or "wildness"—concepts which at a glance are similar, but break down when one considers debates about whether orangutans should be able to freely "choose" whether to perpetually live alongside humans (e.g., see Galdikas and Shapiro 1996, for the "choice" argument).

Much like Braverman, I therefore used a multi-sited approach for the purpose of comparing conservation projects: a form of "lateral comparison", to use Candea's (2016) term, which involves "comparisons between 'them', and 'them', and 'them'" rather than "between 'us' and 'them'", as in "frontal comparison" between researcher and subject. Recent debate has centred on the feasibility, ethics, and limitations of lateral comparison in anthropology. For example, Candea (2016) argues that although frontal comparison has reframed itself in response to 1980s critiques (e.g., questioning of anthropology's "epistemic privilege" in representing others) as a tool for challenging "our" (i.e., "Western") worldview, "no similar epistemological recuperation has been made or even attempted for lateral comparison" (p.11). Outstanding issues with lateral comparison to be "recuperated" include the issue of epistemic authority, "the notion of comparable 'units'", and "the idea of stable generalizable categories".

Yet for many anthropologists, myself included, comparison is a crucially important method (e.g., see van der Veer 2016), which need not be viewed as worryingly associated with "'generalis[ing]' from particulars" (Candea 2016, 7) to aid "grand theory construction" (Fox and Gingrich 2002, 6). Units of comparison also need not be imposed by the anthropologist: both Braverman and I compared sites that are lumped into coherent categories (e.g., in-situ, ex-situ, rehabilitation centre) by participants or public discourses. Rather than generalise across sites, in both cases comparison helped to undermine commonly accepted categories. Comparison can therefore be the enemy

of grand theory construction (see Fox and Gingrich 2002). To my mind, so long as it is done respectfully – following lessons learned since the 1980s about how to represent “the other” – lateral comparison is not particularly in need of “recuperation”, and should in certain contexts, such as primate studies, be more widely embraced. Comparing one’s own research with that of other anthropologists will perhaps remain difficult, but certainly employing one’s own observations of difference between field sites – a task made more feasible with multi-sited methods – can provide valuable information that would otherwise remain invisible. As my primatologist supervisor, Professor Volker Sommer, advised before I commenced research, conducting single-sited ethnographic work in orangutan R&R could result in “tunnel vision”, since projects are notoriously idiosyncratic, and project directors convinced that their method is best. Thus, while restricting one’s focus to a bounded field site might allow the researcher to appreciate the value of not knowing certain things, using a multi-sited approach to investigate those missing pieces is a worthwhile endeavour.

5 Multispecies morals: taking conservationists seriously

The kinds of cross-project comparisons described above, which are crucial for understanding what R&R is and how it is practised, could not have readily been accessed through ethnography at a single site. However, my multi-sited approach did prevent me from examining intimate interactions between humans and orangutans, as in the Auckland Zoo project. Furthermore, my understanding of methods, and intra-organisational conflicts, came largely from what people told me rather than what I observed firsthand.

A central justification for participant observation is that it enables researchers to access what people actually do, not just what they say they do (Arluke and Sanders 1996, 38). This assumes that interviewees lie about their actions, to researchers or themselves. I was certainly aware that some participants were not telling me the whole truth, prompting me to at times use a journalistic “skeptical” questioning technique (Peterson 2010). I was also aware that it would be useful to corroborate participants’ claims, even those I implicitly believed, with personal observations: for example, one participant described a case in which tourists were allowed to hold and touch orangutans at a supposedly “hands off” tourism project. However, most of the time I believed that I was told the truth, since on some controversial subjects multiple participants’ accounts closely aligned, and I generally found that even project directors were eager to speak with me candidly. Thus, although I did not always observe conflicts and problems firsthand, I believe that interviews were an effective technique for rapidly gathering important, and often sensitive, information. This is somewhat surprising, given the barriers to accessing honest opinions when “studying up” (Nader 1972) and dealing with “non-naïve” participants who are accustomed to dealing with journalists or reading academic work (Awad 2006, 932; Mosse 2006).

I believe that there are two central reasons why so many participants opened up

to me. First, because I was not formally affiliated with a single NGO, I was, correctly, viewed as a neutral party rather than belonging to a specific “side” on matters of debate. In this sense, lacking a focal field site was an advantage. Furthermore, I suspect that my status as a quasi-primatologist, reflected in my academic background and my co-supervision by a primatologist, signalled that my primary motivation for undertaking the project was a genuine concern about the fate of orangutans. Though wildlife conservation features prominently in social anthropology, the focus tends to be on the negative consequences for local communities, and the discourses used by NGOs, states, and others responsible for global environmental governance to justify their practices. Often these analyses conclude that the conservation involves “imposing neo-imperialist ideology” on local people (Kopnina 2012, 134; see also Howell 2015; Kopnina 2017). Social anthropologists therefore often implicitly adopt a culturally relative, anthropocentric worldview in which “[p]eople must come first” (Kottak 1999, 33) and “traditional practices”, no matter their damage to non-humans – such as slash-and-burn agriculture and hunting – ought to be preserved (Kopnina 2017, citing Einarsson 1993; Brockington 2002; Kalland 2009; McElroy 2013 as examples of this tendency). Social anthropologists might therefore find themselves on the “wrong side” of environmental debates by opposing conservation (Brosius 2003, 330). Taking issue with this tradition, several scholars have called for anthropologists to partner with conservationists and ask critical questions not only about how conservation serves humans, but also how it serves non-humans (Robbins 2012; Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2015; Kopnina 2017). Because I was perceived as sharing participants’ interest in helping orangutans, interviews may have been less adversarial than if I had been perceived purely as a social anthropologist. Even if researchers do not have a background in primatology, taking non-human interests seriously – as is the intention of the “animal moment” – might facilitate trust with conservationists and other animal advocates.

6 Conclusion

Using ethology and multi-sited ethnography might allow researchers of human-alloprimate relationships to answer questions that cannot be readily studied through classic single-sited ethnography, such as how alloprimates respond to people, and similarities and differences between field sites. Embracing such approaches might simultaneously help make “multispecies ethnography” genuinely different to ethnographies of the past. Furthermore, by acting as “quasi-primatologists”, methodologically or ethically, social anthropologists might positively change how they are perceived by participants and therefore their degree of access. To this end, it could be useful to provide training for researchers of human-alloprimate relationships in both primatology and social anthropology, which would involve offering a genuinely “holistic” anthropology programme. However, few anthropologists actually produce inter-sub-disciplinary

research, so this could be difficult (Borofsky 2002; Riley 2006). If training in primatology is not possible, then an explicit alignment of ethics to take the interests of alloprimates more seriously could have a similarly positive effect on research access.

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