

Freedom for JoJo - West Kalimantan Centre Gives Permanent Sanctuary to Orangutans Who Can't Return to the Wild

Tuesday 19 August, 2025

In the run-up to International Orangutan Day on 19 August, JoJo – the first orangutan rescued back in 2009 by Yayasan Inisiasi Alam Rehabilitasi Indonesia (YIARI) in collaboration with the West Kalimantan Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA), has, for the first time in more than 20 years, been able to climb trees and experience the forest.

This long-awaited moment comes thanks to the creation of a two-hectare semi-wild forest enclosure at YIARI's orangutan rehabilitation centre in Sungai Awan Kiri village, Muara Pawan, Ketapang, West Kalimantan.

JoJo, now over 25 years old, has a harrowing backstory. In 2009, he was found in appalling conditions – chained by the leg to a post in a backyard with just 30 centimetres of movement, surrounded by rubbish and without shelter from sun or rain. The chain had cut deep into his skin, causing severe, infected wounds.

Karmele Llano Sánchez, YIARI's CEO, remembers the day she first saw him:

"It was one of the hardest days of my life. All I could do was clean his wounds and move the chain to his other leg, because at that time, there was no orangutan rescue facility in West Kalimantan. I had to leave JoJo there because we had no other choice."

That moment became a turning point. The lack of facilities to help orangutans like JoJo spurred Karmele and her team to establish the Ketapang rehabilitation centre in 2010. The centre was created in partnership with the YIARI, West Kalimantan BKSDA and with support from International Animal Rescue. The centre delivers long-term rehabilitation of orangutans that have been taken from the forest and kept as pets so that they can return to the wild and live as nature intended. The support and fundraising efforts of International Animal Rescue for the rehabilitation centre continue today.

JoJo's previous owner admitted he had been kept as a pet since infancy. By the time he was rescued, aged around 10, he had missed the vital years when a young orangutan learns survival skills from its mother – skills essential for life in the wild.

When JoJo arrived at the centre, the team discovered he was suffering from rickets caused by years of malnutrition and lack of sunlight, leaving his legs bent and unable to bear weight. He had to walk using his arms. He also endured chronic pneumonia, which took years to treat.

His lasting health problems mean JoJo can never be released into the wild. The new forest enclosure offers the next best thing – a safe, naturalistic space where he can live with dignity, enjoying the sights, smells, and textures of the forest.

Work on the enclosure began in 2022. Designed for orangutans with permanent disabilities, chronic health issues, or those who have spent too long in captivity to survive in the wild, it will also provide a home for residents such as Monte and Jimo. Creating it involved not only building in challenging forest terrain but also ensuring safety for both the animals and the care team, and helping the orangutans adapt to using the space.

"This is a very emotional moment for all of us," said Karmele. "Seeing JoJo climb a tree, even if he is not yet agile, is proof that he is finally experiencing a small piece of the freedom that was once taken from him. When he first came out into the enclosure, JoJo was scared. He only dared to stay outside briefly before retreating to his cage. But slowly, he has gained confidence and is now exploring the surrounding trees."

The project was made possible through support from the Ministry of Environment via the West Kalimantan BKSDA, alongside donors and partners including the Moondance Foundation, Orangutan Outreach, and International Animal Rescue UK.

Murlan Dameria Pane, Head of the West Kalimantan BKSDA, praised the initiative:

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“We appreciate YIARI’s efforts in supporting a better life for wildlife that cannot be released, such as JoJo. This enclosure is a concrete example of a long-term commitment to orangutans with physical or health limitations. With it, we can ensure optimal animal welfare while also supporting conservation work for orangutans and other wildlife at the local level.”

Gavin Bruce, CEO of International Animal Rescue, said:

“It’s incredible to see the majestic JoJo in the new enclosure and climbing trees. International Animal Rescue’s supporters are passionate about orangutans. Through our commitment to the rehabilitation centre with YIARI and the West Kalimantan BKSDA partnership, there is some renewed hope for the species.”

For JoJo, it may not be full freedom, but it is the chance to live out his days surrounded by trees, fresh air, and the natural world he was denied for so long.

To find out more about International Animal Rescue’s work with YIARI please visit <https://www.internationalanimalrescue.org/projects/orangutan-rescue-and-rehabilitation>

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