

Save a Tree. Save Me!

BORNEO PYGMY ELEPHANT

Borneo pygmy elephants are at least half-a-metre shorter than other Asian elephants. As well, they have larger ears, longer tails and are more rounded. They are also more passive than other elephants.

Eating 130 kilograms of food daily, the Borneo pygmy elephant is one of the largest forest herbivores (plant-eating animals) in the world. Its diet consists of roots, grasses, leaves, bananas and sugar cane.

These elephants require large feeding grounds and viable breeding populations to ensure their survival. With the continuous destruction of their forest habitats for logging, agriculture, palm oil plantations, mills and associated human settlements, the elephant populations are separated and feeding areas are reduced. If its habitats are not protected, the Borneo pygmy elephant will follow in the footsteps of the extinct Javan elephant and many other species.

Spread the Word through Play

Create animal masks and perform a play highlighting the plight of pygmy elephants, orangutans and other rainforest animals and their habitats (an elephant mask pattern can be downloaded from the Teacher Toolkit at www.scholastic.com.au/toolkit). Perform the play at assembly, invite parents and guests, and ask them to spread the word. Gold coin donations could be made to organisations that specialise in protecting endangered ecosystems, such as the Australian Orangutan Project (www.orangutan.org.au).

What Does It Mean?

Explain to students that Borneo pygmy elephants are *critically endangered* and are likely to become *extinct* if action isn't taken. Write these words on the board and discuss with students what they think they might mean. Have they heard the words used elsewhere? Do they know of any other animals that are endangered or extinct? Ask them if they know of ways to prevent animals from becoming extinct. Add these words to your word wall, together with any other words students are unfamiliar with.

Habitat Protection

The following activity should help young students understand the importance of protecting the pygmy elephant's rainforest habitat. Assign each student the role of a rainforest plant or animal—they can choose from trees, fruit trees, elephants, orangutans, insects and bees, and flowers (more than one student can play the same role). You could give students index cards showing which group they belong to. Have all students stand on one side of the classroom.

Tell students that some of the rainforest is being cleared, so ask one of each of the 'trees', 'fruit trees' and 'flowers' to sit down. Highlight to the class that there are now fewer trees, fruit and flowers. Ask students if this would have any effect on the elephants and orangutans. Advise them that the animals rely on the trees and eat fruit and nectar, so there won't be as much to go round.

Ask one each of the 'orangutans' and 'elephants' to sit down. Ask students if the insects and bees would be affected by the forest clearing. Advise them the insects and bees feed from the flowers and nectar, so one of the 'insects' will have to sit down. If there are fewer bees, there will also be less honey for orangutans to eat. Orangutans also eat insects. So if there are fewer insects and less honey, there is less food for the orangutans. Ask another orangutan to sit down. Continue this process until there are few or no students left standing.

Discuss the implications of this simulation with the class—what happens to the plants and animals when one of them is removed or dies out? Ensure students understand that all plants and animals in an area (an ecosystem) depend on one another. Show students the images of the destruction of the rainforests (available from the Teacher Toolkit) and discuss the effect on the elephants and orangutans.

How Big?

The Borneo pygmy elephant reaches a height of about 2.5 metres. Other Asian elephants grow to around 3 metres, whereas the African elephant can be up to 4 metres tall. Demonstrate this by measuring lengths of string and marking the various heights on the wall. Label each one accordingly. Students can stand against the wall to see how big they are compared to each elephant! Using the string you can identify objects around the school that measure the same height as the elephants, so students can get an idea of their size.

