

# SUMATRA

*The Last Place On Earth*

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# Introduction

Alex King is a storyteller, an artist and award winning entrepreneur. King's work asks you to change the lens from which you view the world. To look at issues from an alternative perspective. 'Sumatra – The Last Place on Earth' is King's very first photography exhibition in the Cook Islands. The exhibition documents the history, oppression and devastation in Sumatra, Indonesia caused by the Palm Oil Industry. Passionate about the connection between indigenous people, nature and wildlife, King travelled to Sumatra with Photographers Without Borders (PWB) to support the work of the NGOs: the Orangutan Information Centre (OIC) and Nature for Change (NFC).

Through forest restoration projects OIC works with local communities to effectively restore illegal palm oil plantations that are part of the National Park. They also rescue more than one orangutan per month from vulnerable situations. NFC is an Indigenous-led organization that works in a community located at the edge of the same National Park. They work with local farmers to create a buffer zone with fruit trees to keep the orangutans away from conflict with humans and other dangers.

Sumatra is the only place in the world where you'll find endangered Sumatran elephant, tiger, rhino and orangutan living altogether. The Sumatran orangutan is a critically endangered species due to trafficking, human-orangutan conflict, poaching and illegal expansion of palm oil plantations. These such activities have destroyed more than 50% of what was left of the rainforest in the last 50 years, taking 50% of the already critically-endangered wildlife with it.



Alex King & Mike Tavioni.



The Exhibition 6th November 2020.

# Inspiration

Photographers Without Borders are a community of storytellers (photographers and filmmakers) uniting to support community partners on volunteer assignments. The PWB Program connects great visual storytellers with inspiring change makers, creating important social changes around the world.

Their mission is to make storytelling more accessible for communities around the world who are contributing to the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals and UNDRIP. Since 2013, PWB has connected over 100 volunteer storytellers from all over the world to document over 125 assignments with Community Partners. Every year they sponsor an Indigenous storyteller to exhibit their work at CONTACT; North America's largest photography festival. King was the 2020 recipient of this sponsorship however, due to Covid-19 she was unable to exhibit in Canada.

Alex King is continuing her work with Photographers Without Borders featuring as a Storyteller for Change. In the coming years, she will be travelling to both South America and Africa to document PWB projects.

To follow Photographers Without Borders visit: [www.photographerswithoutborders.org](http://www.photographerswithoutborders.org)

# The Exhibition

Medan's 'Old City Centre' in Northern Sumatra, once ruled by Malay Sultan Tjong A Fie in the 1800's, is a vision of contradiction. Today, sits a stark contrast between the decaying Dutch colonial buildings and the current local indigenous structures. They are a reminder of the divide between the wealthy and the poor, and the power of the biggest merchant and richest man in South East Asia; Tjong A Fie. Heavily involved in crimes across the region, A Fie, shipped Javanese people from Java to Medan to work as slaves on the palm oil plantations under the Dutch Colonial rule. People mistake A Fie for being a generous man. It wasn't until mid-1940 that indigenous Indonesia took back their independence over the Malay Sultanate, the Chinese and the Dutch. At the time, the Dutch Colonial had rule over the whole of West Indonesia.



Abandoned Mall.



The Old Mall View.



Dutch Colonial Mall.

The Zoo mentality originated during colonialism in the 1800's; initially humans were exploited and forced to perform for paying customers. The majority were people of colour held captive in cages and fenced enclosures for viewing. Known as "Ethnological expositions", these are now seen as highly degrading and racist. However, society today has been groomed to believe that caging anything is normal. Medan Zoo in Indonesia is one of the worst zoos in the world. Alex King says, "It has a deathly and eerie silence; a sadness that is overwhelming. It is a dark, dirty and poverty stricken environment. The zookeepers rely on the donation of tourists to feed the animals. Passing through the zoo, their state and diminished spirit brought me to tears. No animal should live like this. Animals should remain in their natural habitats, away from humans". The Medan Zoo in particular is run by the Government and Mafia. The same people that run the "darkest" museum.

Chained.



Cage Hitting for Attention.



Unnatural Living.

A Buried History

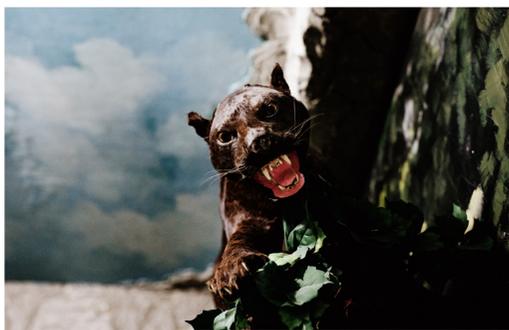
Exploitation

# Darkest Museum

Set deep in the Medan City sits another dark and exploitive piece of history in the Rahmat International Wildlife Gallery & Museum. Owned and run by Rahmat Shah; a trophy and game hunter. He was head of the Indonesian Zoo Association and has curated the museum containing thousands of different taxidermy animal species. Alex King says, "The animals are cruelly displayed in this disturbing museum and what is more alarming is that a very high percentage of these animals are endangered." This museum exploits wildlife from places all over the world including Polar Bears, Kiwi's, Koalas, Rhinos, and more. It is said that Rahmat believes himself to a conservationist. Yet there sits shelves of 'animal' trophies and a shrine dedicated to Rahmat Shah.



Museum Curiosity.



Trophy Hunter's Favourite.



Stuffed Bear.

# The Oil of Life



50kg of Palm.

The Not-For-Profit organisation, the Orangutan Information Centre & The Restoration site are built next to a large palm oil farm. Alex King interviewed one of the palm oil farmers, Anto, about his experience as a harvester. He spoke of having little choice in the work that he does. He needs to earn money. The rainforest restoration site workers showed Alex the process of harvesting palm oil; from collecting them off the trees, to carrying them one by one to the trucks and then transported on to the factories.

Each palm oil pod weighs a hefty 45kgs and has to be carried one by one and the truck must be filled with up to 50 a day. The palm oil pods are spikey, hard and heavy for the men to carry by hand each day. The job is very tough. And the only ones that benefit from this are us; the large foreign corporations, the government and the wealthy in Indonesia. Unfortunately for all of the workers and small village people, the pay is next to nothing. One of the most important things expressed in this series is that this is extremely hard labour and the indigenous and village people have limited options. Alex was told that the local people are forced into this type of work in order to make a living.



Palm Forever.



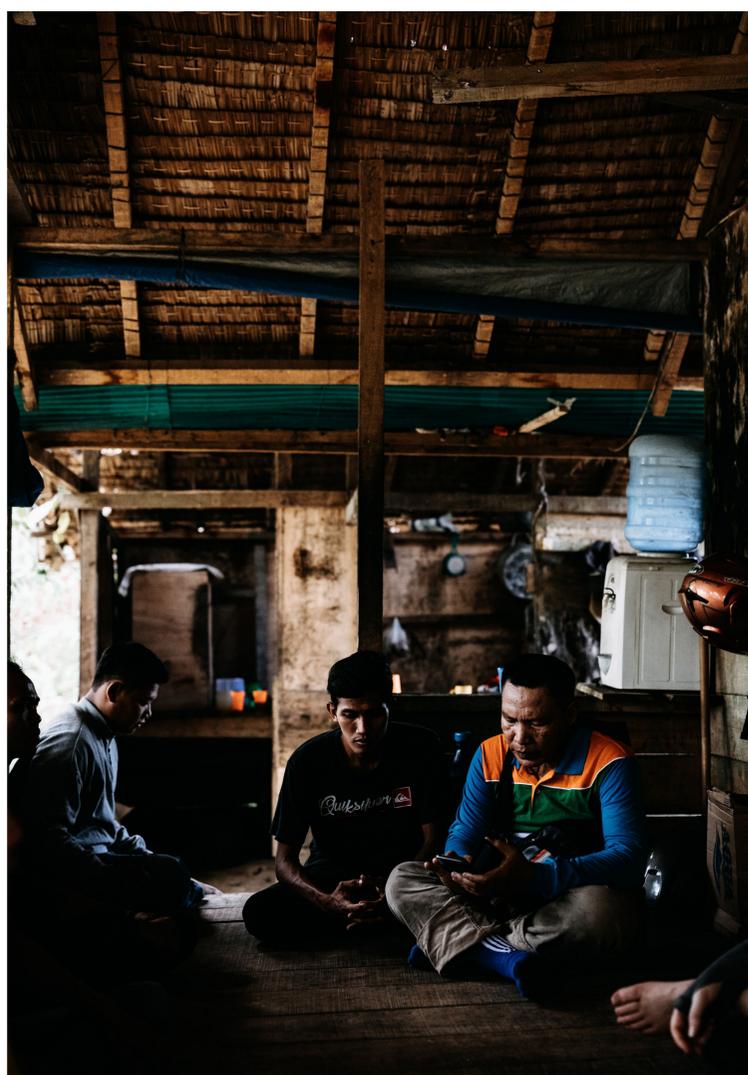
Palm Oil Seeds.

The Orangutan Information Centre (OIC) is a Medan-based NGO with a mission to conserve and protect Sumatran orangutans (*Pongo abelii*) and their homes, in the rainforest. OIC works with local communities living alongside the orangutan habitat; the Leuser Ecosystem. This is the last stronghold of the Sumatran orangutan, which is amongst the most important tropical forest still remaining in Asia.

The Leuser Ecosystem is a globally important and high priority landscape for conservation and it is also the last place on Earth where orangutans, tigers, rhinos and elephants co-exist in the wild. Established in 2001 by Panut Hadisiswoyo, OIC has grown from being a source for information to a vibrant organization running multiple programs dedicated to forest and wildlife conservation. They help communities by providing alternative sources of income, and introducing and supporting sustainable organic farming methods. OIC's highly-skilled staff come from various professional backgrounds and they share a passion and commitment to the idea of conservation. They also believe that local people are best suited to help the Sumatran forest and biodiversity. The OIC organisation is the first entity to buy old palm oil plantations and successfully turn them back into native forests, providing new homes from the wildlife.

The role for OIC includes:

1. Habitat restoration
2. Community education & empowerment
3. Human orangutan conflict mitigation
4. Community patrols.



Forest Protectors.



Heavy Work.



Nature for Change.



Darma, Stories of a Park Ranger.

### PANUT

Alex King described meeting Panut as something special. "It takes an incredibly special person to take on the role that he has. He has had to go up against corrupt government officials, fighting for the cause. This corruption is supported by the Mafia," says King. He has had his life threatened on many occasions. As a result for the safety of himself and his famil, he has stepped down from his role as the Director of OIC.

### NAYLA

Communications Officer Nayla Azmi was an inspirational role model, she taught me so much from this trip. From the struggles of being a woman in this conservation industry, and what she deals with daily, to the rescue missions. Her passion, drive and fight for all wildlife, and to save the forests of Indonesia, is commendable.

### RIAN

Right next to the Restoration site is also where Park Ranger Rian and forest Guardian and elder Pak Baron are based deep in the Bukit Mas Forest, protecting the forest and wildlife from poachers and illegal logging happening in this area. Rian at the age of 23 is one of only park rangers in Sumatra who has put his life on the line. His reasoning for doing such work was because "no one else will do it."

On a memorable occasion for Rian he tells of the story where he had been surrounded and threatened by illegal deforestation workers, there after kidnapped and forced deep into the mountains whilst having a machete held to his throat before being let go hours later.

All the people photographed in this series are from different sectors of OIC and all involved in the rescue missions and saving the native forests of Sumatra.

In the small town of Bukit Lawang, Alex King trekked 6 hours into the forest and mountainside to find Mina, a rehabilitated endangered Sumatran Orangutan. Mina was poached and abused when she was just a baby. Her mother was murdered by poachers and she was left to live out her life in cage until she was rescued by ex-National Park ranger, Darma, who worked for the Orangutan Information Centre at the time. Darma and the organisation were responsible for the rehabilitation of Mina in the early 90's.

Alex King's experience of Mina and the Orangutan species is that they are the most beautiful, gentle, intelligent and loving animals. Humans are constantly pushing them to the brink, constantly attacking and provoking these our most closely related species. Add to this the fact that the Palm Oil industry is completely destroying their habitat.

Mina bears machete scars on her face from guides who attacked her. Tourists would get too close to her and she would simply try to defend her babies. As a result she has been labelled aggressive. However, in her natural habitat she is calm and peaceful. Alex King watched Mina from a distance, drawing in the dirt with a stick. Mina watched King too, from a distance, and came closer to her in a few moments of curiosity.



Wild Male Orangutan.



She Sits, She Draws.



Keeping Watch.

*Proudly Supporting*



Nature For Change brings together nature and people, in order to protect Sumatra's rainforest and its one-of-a-kind ecosystem where orangutans, rhinos, tigers and elephants coexist.

[www.natureforchange.org](http://www.natureforchange.org)



The Orangutan Information Centre (OIC)'s mission is to protect and conserve the orangutan population in Sumatra by restoring their degraded forest homes.

[www.orangutancentre.org](http://www.orangutancentre.org)

# Thank you to the Sponsors



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To the sponsors of Alex Kings' exhibition; meitaki maata for your kindness and generosity. For supporting Alex's work, her vision and passion. May we all continue to work together to make not only the Cook Islands, but the world at large, a better place to live. Terima kasih, meitaki maata and thank you very much.

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*Curated by*



Kia Orana Collective (KOC Co) Ltd. is an innovative and conscious agency based in Rarotonga, Cook Islands. Established in 2016, KOC Co is committed to creating, developing, promoting and executing successful campaigns.

Based on four key pillars: Legacy, Growth, Collaboration and Inclusion, KOC Co provides professional services in, but not limited to, events, marketing, PR, advertising, communication, brand, production, digital archiving, business strategies, workshops and training.

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*Amy Kainuku & Claire Wilson*

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Thank you