



Devil may care

New research has shown that Tasmanian devils have more extensive social networks than previously imagined. The study, published in *Ecology Letters*, may explain why Devil Facial Tumour Disease (DFTD) has spread through the devil population so quickly.



Ratcatcher

A pitcher plant that can digest rats has been discovered on Palawan Island in the Philippines. The plant was found by a team led by two British botanists, Stewart McPherson and Alastair Robinson, who called it *Nepenthes attenboroughii* after the wildlife broadcaster.

NEWS OF THE EARTH INTERNATIONAL

Orangutans hit by peat fires

Indonesian government unable to stop the burning as peat-swamp forests are taken out.

Raging fires have broken out in the peat-swamp forests of Central Kalimantan in Indonesian Borneo, threatening endangered wildlife including the world's largest population of orangutans.

According to conservationists working in the area, the fires were started by local people and palm-oil plantation owners to clear land for crops. Fires break out most years, but Borneo is currently in the grip of severe drought due to El Niño conditions, and this is causing the fires to spread more rapidly through dry vegetation and peat deposits.

"Orangutan sleeping nests can be seen in trees shrouded in smoke and rhinoceros hornbills fly through the haze overhead," reported a spokesperson for the Orangutan Tropical Peatland Project. As well as 8,000

orangutans, these forests are home to eight other primate species, clouded leopards, sun bears and other rare species.

Globally, peatland clearance is one of the largest sources of carbon dioxide – 10 per cent of emissions, according to Wetlands International – and contributes significantly to climate change.

Firefighting teams have been working around the clock, but

peat fires spread underground and are difficult to control.

Environment Minister Rachmat Witoelar appealed to governors to stop all burning, but regional autonomy means that authority

rests with them.

"National and local governments are committed to the ban on burning, but because there are not enough resources, the policy is not well implemented at a grassroots level," Witoelar said.

Indonesia banned peatland conversion in 2007, but earlier

75%

The percentage of Indonesia's carbon dioxide emissions that are attributable to deforestation – it is the world's third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases.



Fires in Borneo's peat-swamp forests are difficult to control because they can spread underground.

this year the Agricultural Ministry proposed plans to convert millions of hectares to palm oil plantations, in contradiction of this policy. A spokesperson for the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) said, however, that in this case there was nothing to link the fires to palm-oil conversion.

Indonesia and Malaysia produce 85 per cent of the world's palm oil, mostly on Borneo. Demand has risen sharply in the past 20 years – it is used in beauty products, foods and for biofuels.

Kara Moses

BACKGROUND

» Forest fires occur frequently in Indonesia but spread uncontrollably during El Niño years.

» Peatlands store vast amounts of carbon that is released into the atmosphere when they burn.

» Orangutan habitat in Kalimantan shrunk by 39 per cent between 1992 and 2002, largely due to logging and conversion to palm oil plantations.

» Help put out the fires by donating: www.giving.ox.ac.uk/academic_departments/mps/wildcru.html (select 'Emergency Fund').

The company of whales

First spotted in 1991, Migaloo the white humpback whale is back. In fact, he (DNA analysis in 2004 confirmed Migaloo is an adult male) never went away, but 2009 has been a bumper year for sightings, with 10 confirmed off eastern Australia in June, July and August. Despite the scrutiny given to Migaloo, scientists are still not sure if he is a genuine albino, so they classify him as "hypo-pigmented" – not words you would have seen Herman Melville use to describe his famous creation.

