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FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT: The Baby Trade

Airs 8.30 pm Monday January 22nd on ABC TV and iview

A cruel trade is tearing baby orangutans from their jungle homes to be sold abroad. Samantha Hawley gets a smuggler's story - and meets the warriors risking their lives to save the great apes from extinction.

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Baby orangutans Nomita and Chisuka wrestle and tumble and cuddle. They're irresistibly cute.

The babies look happy now, but not long ago traffickers snatched them from the wilds of Indonesia and sent them thousands of kilometres to Bangkok, where they were rescued from a tiny box on the back seat of a taxi.



They were likely drugged after their mothers had been shot or bludgeoned to death.

Every time the mother got on a tree, we'd cut down that tree, and when she hopped onto another tree we'd cut down that one too. We'd keep on cutting until she had nowhere else to go – orangutan smuggler-turned informant tells how he caught orangutan babies

It's a well-oiled machine, a very well organised criminal gang. It's mafia – Thailand-based animal rights campaigner Edwin Wiek on the illegal wildlife trade

Edwin Wiek devotes his life to caring for rescued animals, including critically endangered orangutans that would fetch tens of thousands of dollars from Asian and Middle Eastern buyers. He knows the risks from traffickers and corrupt officials.

I've been in jail several times for pissing off the wrong people. I've been pulled out of my car at night by people pretending to be police – Edwin Wiek

Wiek introduces reporter Samantha Hawley to Maggie and Chico, young orangutans sold as pets in Thailand and now living in a forested refuge. Maggie shows promise for rehabilitation. Pathetically, Chico can't even climb a tree.

This boy was born high in the trees and his mother must have been shot, just because some rich person somewhere in this world believes that having an orangutan as a pet is OK – Edwin Wiek

Chico is lucky compared to Jono, a huge adult male once kept as a pet in Jakarta. For five years, Jono has been alone in a small cage at a government facility. Beyond rehabilitation, he is the embodiment of fears that orangutans will soon disappear from the wild. He bellows his distress.

But so long as there are people like Hardi Baktiantoro, there is cause for hope. The man Edwin Wiek calls "the orangutan commando" runs a group that fights poachers and teaches rescued orangutans to return to the wild.

Baktiantoro's next graduate is a 15-year-old male called Oki. After years re-learning how to forage and build nests, it's time for Oki to be go back to the forests of Indonesian Borneo. Foreign Correspondent is invited to come and capture the moment. As we discover, not all goes to plan.

The Baby Trade, Samantha Hawley's last major assignment as Indonesia bureau chief, takes her on the trafficking trail from the wilds of Borneo to the bedlam of Bangkok. Watch it on Foreign Correspondent at 8.30 pm Monday January 22 on ABC TV (repeated 1 pm Tuesday and 11.30 pm



Media Release

Wednesday on ABC TV; 8 pm Saturday and 1 am Sunday on ABC News).
Also on iView.