

unlikely that these researchers were unpaid volunteers. Instead, he suspects that some institutions — including the University of Utah — reported only the money that postdocs received from the institution's payroll, and overlooked fellowships and other external sources of income. "University of Utah postdoctoral scholars are being paid for their work," a university spokesman said.

While compiling data, McDowell opted to disregard the 411 reported salaries that were less than \$23,660 a year. That is the threshold below which many postdocs would be eligible for overtime pay under federal law. "Those are likely reporting errors," McDowell says.

The remaining 12,554 salary reports ranged from \$23,660 to \$114,600 a year (see 'Rags to riches'). McDowell suspects that some institutions mistakenly included pay data for staff scientists or other employees in their reports, which could explain some of the highest salaries. Even with that caveat, his survey suggests that postdoc salaries range widely. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign reported the lowest median salary at \$27,515. The University of Maryland at College Park reported the highest median figure — \$56,000.

McDowell notes that the data set is still incomplete. Some institutions reported salaries for only a small fraction of their workforce, and the University of California system denied his request outright. Its public-records office told *Nature* in a statement that it lacks the capacity to do "the programming required to create the custom data report that Mr McDowell requested".

Other attempts to gather information on postdoctoral salaries have met with less resistance. The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) in Rockville, Maryland, obtained salary information from 127 of its more than 200 member institutions for a forthcoming report. Eighty-five per cent reported paying all postdocs at least \$47,484 — the minimum salary that the US National Institutes of Health established for the position in the 2017 fiscal year. The NPA is set to publish the full results of its poll in January 2018.

In the meantime, McDowell is still combing through his data set. Throughout November, he plans to publish daily analyses on the Future of Research website ([futureofresearch.org](http://futureofresearch.org)) that will examine salaries at individual institutions and university systems. In doing so, he hopes to promote conversation about the treatment of early-career researchers.

"In academia, we're not supposed to talk about money and we're not supposed to aspire to having money," McDowell says. "I think scientists should value scientists." ■



MAXIME ALIAGA/SOCP-BATANG TORU PROGRAMME

The Batang Toru orangutans have smaller heads than other species.

POPULATION BIOLOGY

# New orangutan species identified

*Work substantiates long-held suspicions of an isolated population in Indonesia that is distinct from all other groups.*

BY APRIL REESE

Almost a century after scientists first heard rumours of its existence, an isolated population of orangutans on the Indonesian island of Sumatra has been confirmed as a distinct species.

The orangutans inhabit the Batang Toru forest in western Sumatra. A researcher exploring the area in the 1930s had reported an isolated orangutan population, but it wasn't until biological anthropologist Erik Meijaard, founder of conservation group Borneo Futures in Jakarta, discovered the paper in the mid-1990s that scientists went looking for the population. Villagers showed researchers the remains of a female orangutan, and nests confirmed the population's presence. A male orangutan killed by locals in 2013 provided tissue and bone for analysis.

From the start, scientists noticed that these apes looked different from other orangutans. They had smaller heads, with flatter faces, and their hair was frizzier than that of their cousins living farther north on Sumatra or on the nearby island of Borneo.

Now, genetic tests, field observations and a comparison of the male skeleton against 33 orangutan specimens in museums have revealed that the Batang Toru group is a distinct species. Named *Pongo tapanuliensis*, the

great ape was described in *Current Biology* on 2 November by a team that included most of the world's orangutan experts (A. Nater *et al. Curr. Biol.* <http://doi.org/cfvk>; 2017). "It's taken 20 years to come to the realization of what this is," Meijaard says.

Although the genetic analysis of *P. tapanuliensis* relies on a single skeleton, Meijaard says that's not unusual in taxonomy. Many studies, he says, rely on a single piece of evidence, and typically consider only morphology. The latest study shows that the group is distinct not only in morphology, but also in genetics and behaviour, he says.

Russ Mittermeier, executive vice-chair of Conservation International, based in Washington DC, and chair of the primate-specialist group at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), describes the evidence as "unquestionably" sufficient to support the new species designation.

The animals' long-term survival is uncertain. Previous population analyses suggest that there are fewer than 800 individuals, making it the most endangered of the great apes.

"It would be bitterly ironic if it goes extinct as a biologically viable population just as it is described as a new species," says Biruté Mary Galdikas, an orangutan specialist in Los Angeles, California, who founded Orangutan Foundation International. ■