



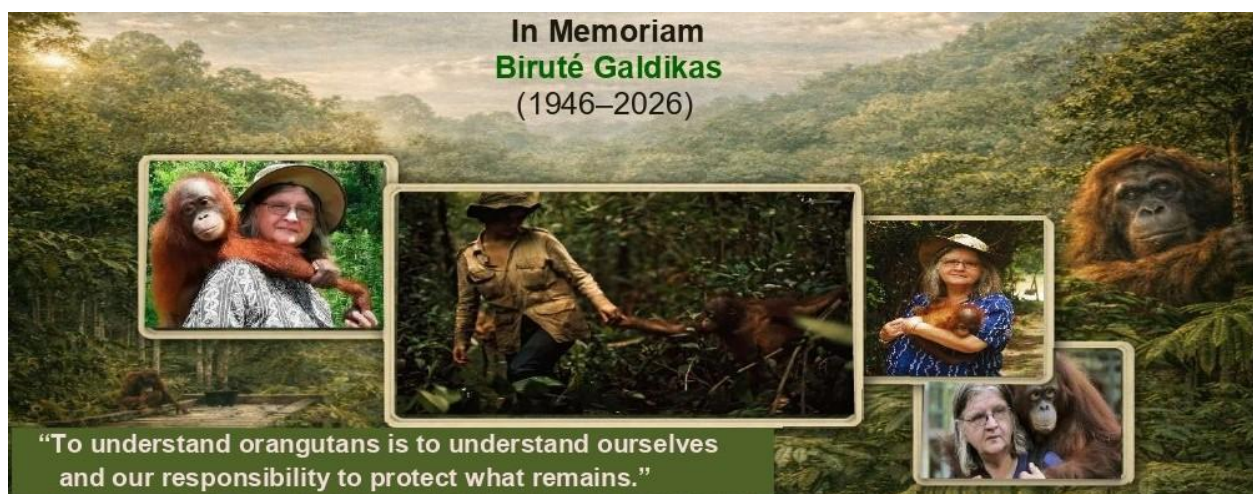
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IN MEMORIAM

Birutė Galdikas, OC (1946–2026), Primatologist and Defender of Orangutans



Birutė Galdikas, OC, primatologist and protector of orangutans (10 May 1946 – 24 March 2026) was born to Lithuanian refugees in Wiesbaden, Germany. Her parents emigrated to Canada, where she spent her first years in Quebec, Toronto, and Vancouver, where she began studies at the University of British Columbia. The family moved to the United States and Birutė went on to read psychology and zoology at the University of California, Los Angeles. She then took a degree in anthropology. She met Louis Leakey and indicated her interest in studying orangutans in Borneo. Leakey found money for the research via the *National Geographic* and work began in Indonesian Borneo in 1971.

This has led to substantial knowledge of the ecology and ethology of orangutans, which were the least known of the great apes. Leakey's encouragement of the 'Trimates' (as he called Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Birutė Galdikas) was indeed far-sighted. Galdikas' observations are very sensitive and raise the same kind of questions faced by Goodall: the use of tools, inquisitiveness, emotional life, and response to human beings [1]. The field work has continued for generations and is among

the longest accomplished for any mammal. Galdikas' work was recognized by her being awarded the rank of an Officer in the Order of Canada.

Galdikas fostered research as well as orphaned orangutans. These endeavours included rewilding of the orphans as autonomous beings. The complicated relations among timber businesses, government, and palm planters in Indonesia have, at the time of Galdikas' death, produced the extraordinary situation that a Unesco-designated area of forest in Indonesian Borneo is being threatened with destruction for a palm plantation and almost nothing is being done to oppose this. Threats to the orangutan are severe [2]. The animal's plight in Sumatra and in Malaysian Borneo is just as insecure. Alfred Russel Wallace and Darwin would be horrified.

The Orangutan Foundation International, which Galdikas founded in 1986, will no doubt find the position getting worse in the probable world economic conditions of the near future [3].

References

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- [3] Butler, R. A., 2026, *Biruté Galdikas, primatologist who spent a lifetime studying & defending orangutans, has died at 79* (March 26), Mongabay. <https://news.mongabay.com/2026/03/birute-galdikas-primatologist-who-spent-a-lifetime-studying-defending-orangutans-has-died-at-79/>

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