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Adopting Orangutans: Ecotourist Labor, Altruism, and Charismatic Megafauna

Youth of the Global North travel to the Global South to care for charismatic endangered species. They participate in a moral economy in which individual efforts deflect the problems of structural inequalities. In Malaysia, British young women pay for the privilege of caring for orphaned orangutans that are rehabilitated to the “wild.” This phenomena is a useful example of the way in which caring is not a service paid for, but a privilege paid to experience. Using interviews, participant observation and publicized testimonies, this paper considers the role of care and the discourse of altruism in the narratives of volunteers who pay to care for orphaned orangutans in Sabah, Malaysia.