



Plundering Indonesia's forests

Indonesia's forest tracts are among the largest on the planet

November 9, 1999

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JAKARTA, Indonesia (CNN) — It was almost two years since our last assignment here. During that time, Indonesia has been racked by economic and social turmoil.

This time we wanted to find out what was happening on the big story we covered in 1997: raging forest fires in Borneo and Sumatra.

Fortunately, abundant rains prevented the fires from breaking out again this year. But we found another disturbing story.

For most Indonesians their troubles are obvious: unemployment, inflation, corruption, human rights abuses, and widespread separatist violence.

But if those are not enough to give them nightmares, there's another peril that overshadows all the others, a catastrophe that would haunt future generations when today's problems are only memories — the looming specter of environmental disaster.

Destruction on a vast scale

In 1997-98 the fires made big headlines by generating a blanket of smoke across Southeast Asia. The haze was blamed for respiratory ailments, shipping collisions and airplane crashes. But these unfortunate consequences deflected attention from the tragedy taking place in the forests where the fires were blazing.

In 1997-98 the fires reportedly destroyed more than 4.5 million hectares of forest across Indonesia. That's an area larger than Denmark; more than twice the size of New Jersey; a huge chunk of priceless tropical habitat that is now gone forever.

And inside the burning forests, of course, countless wild animals perished in the flames. Among them were certainly thousands of orangutans, the endangered great ape that now seems doomed to extinction.

Evidence now confirms that most of the fires were set by timber and agri-business companies. Their purpose was to clear land in the cheapest possible way, to make it easier to go ahead with profitable investments in oil palm, rubber and timber plantations.

Never mind that the fires were set intentionally in defiance of Indonesian law. According to many critics, the fires were only part of a long-standing system of aggressive exploitation of Indonesia's

forests that enriched an elite group of businessmen, military officers and politicians inside a circle surrounding former president Suharto.

As expected, with the collapse of the old regime there are now many accusations about corruption and illegal fortunes amassed by Suharto's family and cronies. Those who profited from forest resources are only part of a much bigger scandal.

Legacy of exploitation

But there's something different about the forest dealings. Years of abusive exploitation have left a legacy that could outlive the Suharto era and condemn Indonesia's forests to annihilation.

The legacy is the perception of forests as a source of timber, a storehouse of a valuable commodity to be harvested for cash, as quickly as possible.



Illegal logging in Indonesia is on the rise

The way many Indonesians value their forests is clearly shown in the rise of illegal logging in the aftermath of Suharto's fall.

With a lingering power vacuum in Jakarta, some Indonesians have seen an opportunity to steal timber from the forests, even from protected reserves and national parks. Extensive illegal logging is causing widespread damage to forested habitats that were undisturbed until these recent invasions.

Among piles of harvested trees, we spoke to some illegal loggers in Tanjung Puting National Park. After years of watching rich people reap rewards from the forests, they said, it was now time for them to claim their share of the timber.

According to Ambrose Ruwindrijarto, an environmental activist here, many Indonesians have felt cheated because they didn't have access to the forests. Their rights have always been given away to concessions, to businessmen, he told us, and now suddenly when they feel more empowered they go into the forest and take something for themselves.

Many illegal loggers are confident that government authorities will fail to prosecute them, and in most cases they've been right. In fact, local officials often work with them to evade the law, in exchange for a share in profits.

The idea that forests are to be plundered for profit has trickled down from the top, an attitude that conservationists say must be changed if Indonesia's remaining forests are to be saved.

Still time for reform

Unfortunately even the new government, charged with reformist ambition, might fail to give the forests the attention they deserve. It's appalling that the political parties don't have sufficient comprehension on forestry issues in Indonesia, says Ruwindrijarto, who laments that he and other conservationists are having a difficult time trying to focus new political leaders on the problem.



Losing the forests of Indonesia could have global repercussions

In its last days in October, the old government rushed a new forestry law through Indonesia's parliament. It was intended as a measure of reform, but conservationists say it perpetuates the treatment of forests as sources of timber instead of valuable ecosystems to be managed sustainably for future generations.

Conservationists here say the new law, like the old, focuses on the state's monopoly on forest resources and the process of awarding concessions to outsiders, ignoring the rights of local people. They warn that the law will continue to benefit rich timber barons, promote the corruption of politicians, and encourage the further destruction of Indonesia's forests.

There are still vast tracts of magnificent forests to save here: the largest in Asia, third largest on the planet. They're critical parts of our global environment, the only home for many endangered species of animals and plants. They're vital sources of food, raw materials and medicines for millions of Indonesians. Losing these forests could cause incalculable damage in ways we can't even foresee.

There are now hundreds of grass-roots environmental organizations in Indonesia. Many are determined to stop the annihilation of their forests. That's a story with global implications, and we'll do our best to cover that in the months ahead.

Originally posted at: <http://www.cnn.com/NATURE/9911/09/our.planet/>
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