Authorities Turn Blind Eye to Borneo Forest Looting

TANJUNG PUTING NATIONAL PARK, Indonesia (CNN) — At low tide, park rangers have to push their boat to the mouth of the Buluh Besar, one of the rivers in Tanjung Puting, Indonesia's premier national park on the island of Borneo.

It is the largest protected area of swamp forest in Southeast Asia and a refuge for many endan-gered species of wildlife, including the orangutan.

But it has become a sanctuary under siege, facing destruction by forces that park rangers seem powerless to stop.

Upriver, illegal loggers cut down countless hardwood trees in a huge assembly-line operation, using a primitive railroad to bring logs from areas deep in the park.

This massive timber theft is carried out in broad daylight, in full view of government auth-orities.

"We have only two speedboats and it's very difficult also to make a patrol," says a park ranger. "This is very difficult to stop them."

Especially when the loggers operate amid a web of corruption where local officials turn a blind eye to crime.

Working with Indonesian activists, the En-vironmental Investigation Agency, a private group based in London, has gone undercover to expose how a few rich businessmen have con-spired to plunder the park.

They're making millions by using low-paid laborers and middlemen to collect and transport stolen timber to their sawmills.

Most illegal logging in the Tanjung Puting Park could be stopped if Indonesia's government had the political will to do so. But conservationists say that kind of commitment remains to be seen, and there are still millions to be made by stealing the trees.

Meanwhile, illegal logging is said to supply more than half the timber consumed by Indonesia's huge wood processing industries, even in legally protected national parks.

[The US imports Indonesian wood in the form of tropical plywood, furniture, dowels and tool handles.]