Time is running out for Sumatra

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At the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, Spain last month, the Indonesian government declared its commitment to saving Sumatra's forests. The joint pledge between regional Sumatran administrations as well as the central government was fully backed by the prestigious World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

The commitment marks the first time regional and central governments have shown a willingness to cooperate in protecting the island's magnificent biodiversity.

Sumatra is home to eleven national parks, stretching from Aceh to Lampung, each with a unique ecosystem. Kerinci Seblat and Bukit Barisan Selatan national parks are recognized as World Heritage sites, considered of global importance and under the watch of the international community. Of course each World Heritage site belongs to people who live in the area, but it is considered in the interest of the international community to protect them. Leuser National Park, meanwhile, has been given the special status of being both a World Heritage site and a biosphere reserve. Biosphere reserves are designated in order to preserve biodiversity, which will in turn improve people's welfare and preserve cultural heritage.

The new commitment comes after the huge loss of Sumatra's forest area, 85 percent has been destroyed since 1985. The vulnerability of peat ecosystems, which account for about 13 per cent of the remaining area, is also of primary concern. Degradation of the peat ecosystem would significantly contribute to carbon emissions. Saving Sumatran forests, hence, is a part of efforts to mitigate global climate change.

However, the problem is rather complicated. The majority of Sumatra's population is dependent on agriculture to survive and access to fertile land is of primary concern. The limited availability of agricultural areas has forced people to illegally occupy protected area and national parks. Moreover, cultural systems, which are deeply tied to natural resources, mean society and the environment are like two faces of one coin. Consequently, nature conservation in Indonesia is more a social than technical challenge.

Regional collaborations are absolutely essential if environmental problems are to be solved. The recent pledge is, in fact, not the first such commitment. There have already been projects involving several provincial governments who share jurisdiction over certain national parks.

The World Bank, for example, undertook an "integrated conservation and development project" (ICDP) between 1999 and 2005 in an area of the Kerinci Seblat National Park (KSNP), which falls under the administration of three provinces: Bengkulu, Jambi and West Sumatra. The project report showed a link between development investment and the destruction of biodiversity; the results were indeed disappointing.

The greatest rate of forest loss during the project period was in the Kerinci and Solok regencies, which ironically received the largest proportion of Village Conservation Grants. There were no
effective mutual understandings between those provincial governments about the target of the program. They perceived the initiative as business as usual. Unsurprisingly, the project bore no significant outcomes.

Until the late 1990s, Sumatra's forests were severely diminished by forest concessions. That era may have ended by a new predator has taken its place: oil palm plantations. According to a report by Greenpeace Indonesia, since 1990, about 28 million hectares of forests, mainly in Sumatra and Kalimantan, have been converted for use as oil palm plantations -- and this is not the end of story.

As demand for oil palms is predicted to increase twofold by 2030 and threefold by 2050, the threat forests face from this sector will only increase. The rising interest in bio-fuels contributes largely to this sector.

The possibility of regional commitments to save critical forest ecosystems looks doubtful. They are much more interested in converting what remains of the protected ecosystems for short-term economic benefit. The case of Bintan Regency officials and lawmaker Al-Amin Nasutionto taking bribes to allow the commercial use of protected forests is a very real example of this.

A similar case occurred in South Sumatra. To make way for the development of an international port, critically important, protected mangrove forests were cut down. Once again, bribery between government officials and lawmakers was involved. Meanwhile in Bengkulu, one government official was recently involved in large scale illegal logging.

Verbal commitment alone is not enough to save what remains of Sumatra's wilderness. Appropriate plans and policies need to be establish and action must be taken. As sites in Sumatra have World Heritage status, the international community should lend a hand to help save these critical ecosystems. However, the main responsibility rest on our shoulders. We have to work hard if we want to save our own backyard. Ecologically based development has to be initiated.

Perhaps more fundamentally, as environmental problems in Indonesia are more social than technical, conservation programs have to dovetail with efforts to solve social and economic problems. Improving social welfare programs should be the priority. Community empowerment is the key.

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