

The New Threat to West Papua's forests: Oil Palm Plantations

West Papua contains some of the last great tracts of undisturbed rain forest in the Asia-Pacific region. According to Forest Watch Indonesia /Global Forest Watch (FWI/GFW 2002), forest cover in West Papua in 1997 was estimated to be just over 33 million hectares. By 2004 FWI estimated that it had dropped to 30.4 million hectares of natural forest cover, equivalent to 73% of the territory. (Ecology of Papua Part Two (2007).

There is no doubt that the rich, bio-diverse forests of West Papua are coming under major threat as the Indonesian government looks to replace the exhausted forests resources in Sumatra and Kalimantan. The main threats include logging (both legal and illegal) and oil palm plantations although transmigration sites and mining areas have also impacted on the forests of West Papua.

Oil Palm Plantations

The world's demand for bio-fuel is causing deforestation in tropical forests around the world and oil palm plantations are now a major threat to the forests of West Papua.

John McBeth has reported on Indonesian central government plans to massively expand palm oil plantations in West Papua.¹ This would entail the creation of four million hectares of plantations concentrated in the south-eastern districts of Merauke, Boven Digoel and Mappi, and in the Sari, Keerom and Jayapura regencies on the northern side of the Central Highlands. According to McBeth, about 90 per cent of the area designated for conversion to palm oil plantation is primary forest that has never been logged.

The exact amount of land set aside for oil palm plantations is unclear and figures vary according to sources. Greenpeace claims that Indonesia's President has asked Papua's Governor Barnabas Seubu to open up five million hectares of land for conversion into palm oil plantations in a bid to increase biofuel production.²

A recent Down to Earth (DTE) article quotes the Indonesia's Investment Coordinating Board (BKPM) as stating that there are:

“over two million hectares of land in Papua available for oil palm development. Most of this (1.935 million ha) is spread through nine districts in Papua province, with the remaining 150,000 ha in the recently renamed 'West Papua' province. BKPM classifies this land as 'state and customary/collective land' (*Tanah Negara & Ulayat*). The BKPM data states that land already taken for oil palm schemes covers around 90,000 hectares in Papua, and around 30,000 in West Papua. According to Department of Agriculture data”.

The Indonesian Embassy's bi-weekly bulletin in Finland reported that Indonesia is

¹ “Tussle for Papua's forests” The Straits Times (Singapore) 21 August 2007)

² Radio New Zealand International report, 9 October 2007

planning to create 1.5 million hectares of oil palm plantations up to 2010.³ It quotes the chief of the Indonesian Palm Oil Commission (KMSI), Rosediana Suharto, as stating that, “starting this year expansion would begin in stages reaching 1.5 million hectares until 2010 consisting of 1.375 million hectares of new plantations and 125,000 hectares of replanted plantations”. Rosediana Suharto also stated that the new oil palm plantations would be developed outside Java although did not name specific areas.

Indonesia has now become the largest global producer of palm oil after overtaking Malaysia in 2007, with an output of between 17.0-17.2 million tones.⁴

Demand for Palm Oil

There are a number of reasons behind high demand for palm oil including rising oil prices (making biofuels economically viable) and the belief that it could become a major environmentally friendly fuel source of the future, helping reduce greenhouse gases. Many countries also believe it would help reduce their reliance on fossil fuels. Oil palm is a particularly productive crop and a single hectare of oil palm may yield 5,000 kilograms of crude oil, or nearly 6,000 liters of crude.⁵

Down to Earth reports that the demand for biofuel is also being driven by government policy as well as market force and gives the example of the European Union (EU) which has said that 5.75% of all vehicle fuel must be biofuel by 2015 as part of measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.⁶

The EU has come under criticism for setting these targets. Hundreds of NGOs in an open letter to the EU and its citizens have declared that implementing the targets:

"means that the EU will risk breaching its international commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and protect biodiversity and human rights; because...the proposed targets will, amongst other things, promote crops with poor greenhouse gas balances, trigger deforestation and loss of biodiversity and exacerbate local land use conflicts."⁷

Bali climate change summit

In Bali in December 2007, a pay-and-preserve scheme known as reducing emissions from deforestation in developing countries (REDD) aims to allow poorer nations from 2013 to sell carbon offsets to rich countries in return for not burning their tropical forests.⁸

The Governor of Papua, Mr Barnabas Suebu is hoping to earn millions of dollars in carbon credits for Papua if First World countries eventually agree to pay forest-rich

³ Indonesian Embassy's bi-weekly bulletin in Finland (Issue I/05 – 3 May 2007),

⁴ Reuters report “RPT-Indonesia's Astra Agro plans to expand plantations” (31 January 2008)

⁵ Rhett A. Butler, mongabay.com April 25, 2006.

⁶ “Indonesia and biofuel fever”, DTE Newsletter, No. 74 August 2007

⁷ “Pressure mounts against EU biofuel targets”, DTE Newsletter No. 72 March 2007

⁸ Reuters report “Achievements at Bali climate talks”, 30 January 2008

countries for not cutting down their trees, although at the Bali conference countries attending could not agree on a system that would reward countries for preserving their forests. However it appears that the governor is confident that such a system will be agreed on. Mr Suebu, who was named as Time magazine's environmental hero of the year in a special issue in 2007, has also signed a decree with his counterpart, the Governor of West Papua, agreeing to a moratorium on deforestation in the two provinces.⁹

(Note. Although the West Papuan people call the whole of the western half of the island of New Guinea, " West Papua", at the present time West Papua is divided into two provinces, Papua and West Papua. In January 2008 it was proposed that it be divided again, adding an extra 4 new provinces).

Problems

The cutting down of tropical forests in West Papua for oil palm plantations will not only lead to increased global warming but also destroy some of the last great tracts of untouched tropical forest in the Asia Pacific region. The forests of West Papua are rich in bio-diversity and are also utilised by the indigenous people in every aspect of their lives. The forests offer a wealth of natural resources for hunting and gathering and provide construction material for huts as well as medicines having cultural and spiritual significance. As recently as 2005, an international team of scientists from Australia, the US and Indonesia found a 300,000-hectare paradise in the Foja Mountains of West Papua, with the help of local Kwerba and Papasena people, who are the customary landowners of the local forest, and acted as guides and naturalists for the scientists.¹⁰ A team member Kris Helgen, who is completing a PhD under Professor Tim Flannery, said "it's definitely an area of great biological novelty," "There are lots of things found in these mountains that are found nowhere else." When the team returned in 2007, a new species of possum and a giant rat were recorded by the scientists. The Foja Wilderness is part of the great Mamberamo Basin which is still 93 percent forested.¹¹

Loss of biodiversity due to plantations

Scott Frazier cites Friends of the Earth (2004) on the impacts of plantations on biodiversity.

- 80-100% of mammal, reptile and bird species are lost (when plantations are established in primary tropical forest).
- Fire is often used as a management tool on plantations . This fire can spread to the surrounding habitats.¹²

Palm oil production brings pollution. Carelessly and copiously applied pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers plus processing of waste products endanger aquatic and terrestrial flora and fauna, and even coral reefs from runoff.

⁹ "Saving The Rainforest Is a Hero's Job" Today, Singapore 24 January 2008)

¹⁰ "Lost world' may be Earth's last", Anna Salleh ABC Science Online, 8 February 2006).

¹¹ Forest Watch Indonesia, 2004

¹² "Threats to Biodiversity" Ecology of Papua, Part 2 (The Ecology of Indonesia Series Volume V1)

Conflict

A report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) in 2007 reported that

“The social and political tensions generated by natural resources investment have always been an important element of the Papua conflict. Papua’s and West Papua’s timber, fishing and minerals are vital to the national economy, yet their populations are poorer than those of any other province in Indonesia except West Nusa Tenggara....

“The most significant new investment in Papua, however, is plantation development, particularly oil palm, and the bulk of it – potentially hundreds of thousands of hectares – will be in Boven Digoel, Mappi and Merauke”.¹³

The report raised a number of concerns including “the potential influx of non-Papuan Indonesian workers”. West Papuans are already concerned that they will become a minority in their own land and any influx of migrants into an area has the potential to cause conflict between the local people and Indonesia workers.

The Military

A report released in 2005 by the UK’s Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) and Indonesia’s TELAPAK exposed a massive trade in illegal logging:

“the army is also used to intimidate local communities opposed to logging operations on their lands. A report by human rights observers documented widespread logging-related abuse by troops stationed near Jayapura. The abuses involved intimidation, assaults and rape”.¹⁴

It should be remembered that the military receive only approximately 30% of their budget from the government and must raise the rest themselves. As well as being involved in the illegal logging trade, the military also provide so-called security to international companies such as PT Freeport for its copper and gold mine. It should be expected that the military will also be used to intimidate local communities opposed to logging operations for oil palm plantations.

Possible Solutions?

Fred Stolle has argued that:

“The recognition by developed countries of the need for immediate funding to developing countries to strengthen forest governance - and the fact that developing countries must also share responsibility to fight climate change - is an important development. It has led to the launch of the World Bank's new Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, which was partly shaped with input from the World Resources

¹³ ICJ “Indonesia Papua: A local Perspective on the Conflict “ Asia Briefing N°66. July 2007

¹⁴ Environmental Investigation Agency and TELAPAK “The Last Frontier Illegal Logging in Papua and China’s Massive Timber theft”, 2005

Institute (WRI) and will compensate developing countries for reducing CO2 emissions related to maintenance of their forests”.¹⁵

According to John McBeth, Governor Barnabus Suebu, is also taking the lead in efforts so stave off the plantation plan in favor of preservation of the forests, as a way of winning for West Papua a stake in the international global market for carbon credits.¹⁶ However, this raises the issue: who would receive the money for the protection of forests? The central government, the provinces or the indigenous people who, traditionally, actually own them?

McBeth also quotes the governor as stating in an interview with the Asian Wall Street Journal, that he was under pressure from Jakarta to create more plantations, based on a plan formulated before he was elected governor. As with the division of West Papua this also raises the issue of “Special Autonomy”. For all the talk that West Papua has enjoyed Special Autonomy since 2001, Jakarta is still firmly in control, and it is for this reason the West Papuan people have rejected it.

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¹⁵ “Forests finally emerging as climate issue” Mongabay.com 30 January 2008

¹⁶ The Straits Times (Singapore) 21 August 2007