

## Logging threatens Indonesia's biodiversity

By Dianthus Saputra Estey in Jakarta

Monday 13 October 2003, 16:57 Makka Time, 13:57 GMT

A tenth of the world's tropical rainforests lie in Indonesia, but their fragile and diverse ecosystems are under threat.

It is estimated that 60% of the total forest cover has been destroyed over the past century, with the bulk of the damage done since the 1970s.

In the 1980s, forest degradation took place at a rate of one million hectares a year, while the 1990s saw annual degradation reaching 1.7 million hectares.

"Our deforestation rate at the moment is 2.4 million hectares per year," Togu Manurung from Forest Watch Indonesia said.

This ranks the depletion of Indonesia's rainforests as the fastest in the world.

### Destructive logging

According to Indro Sugiarto, a researcher at the Indonesian Centre for Environmental Law (ICEL), the largest contributor to the current rate of deforestation is illegal logging. "So far, illegal logging is responsible for some 75% of the damage done to Indonesia's forests," he said during a press conference.

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While Togu Manurung of Forest Watch Indonesia and Ade Fadli of Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi) agree with Sugiarto, they also point out that legal logging has also played an undeniable part in the forests' destruction.

"Over cutting has been a regular practice for the legal loggers," Togu Manurung told Aljazeera.

Fadli said that over-cutting activities have left the forest devastated and no longer able to perform its environmental role.

"I think we have to stop blaming it all on just the illegal logging and start realising that both legal and illegal logging are responsible for our environmental destruction. Therefore both should be referred to as 'destructive logging'," Fadli said.

## Across the border

Rich in a variety of commercial woods, Indonesia's forests have long been the focus of many big business ventures.

Deep in the forests of Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Papua islands, the wood is illicitly harvested and the timber cut into long planks that are bought by traders in Malaysia and Singapore.

After being further cut, sanded, moulded and grooved, the timber is then sold around the world? as flooring in China and Japan, office stationery in Europe and furniture in the United States.

In a recent press conference, President Megawati blamed the rise in destructive logging on the increasing demand for timber on the international market, the increasing use of wooden furniture and the rapid expansion of the wood processing industry.

Koes Saparjadi, a forest ministry official, said that Kalimantan alone loses at least 1000 truckloads of illegal logs every week or about 10,000 cubic metres in the last two months. "Those trucks are certainly carrying logs from our national parks, including Betung Kerihun National Park on the border of Indonesia and Malaysia. The trucks easily pass through our country's check points to Malaysia," Saparjadi told reporters.

He said the illegal logs were mainly those locally known as Meranti logs or lawn wood and estimated losses to the Indonesian economy of one billion rupiah (\$117,000) per week.

According to official data from Indonesia's forest ministry, Indonesia is losing 51 million cubic metres of timber a year through illegal logging, or an estimated 31 trillion rupiah (\$3.5 billion).

## Multinational agreements

The increasing freight of illegal logs across Indonesia's borders has forced the government to approach neighbouring countries with proposed multilateral agreements to safeguard its natural resources.

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Emil Salim, Former environment minister Koes Saparyadi of the forestry ministry said that officials would soon leave for South Korea to talk about a possible agreement to prevent illegal Indonesian timber from entering South Korea.

Last year, the government signed an agreement with Malaysia whose plywood industry relies primarily on illegal Indonesian logs. In addition, other

agreements were signed with the United Kingdom and the European Union to boost efforts to protect the forests and curb illegal logging activities.

After green activists blasted President Megawati for failing to even mention environmental issues in her last annual report, she recently announced that her administration had drawn up a comprehensive environmental programme. It includes plans for the eradication of illegal logging, fighting forest fires, as well as rehabilitation, conservation and restructuring in the legal forestry sector.

### Environmental Effects

"What is overlooked by the market is the benefit that people get from the forest, as an absorber of CO<sub>2</sub>, a natural air filter, as water catchment and on dwellings," Manurung said.

The loss of Indonesia's forests has contributed to a number of natural disasters that have plagued the country over the past few years including this year's prolonged drought and deadly landslides. "The prolonged dry season would not have caused such atrocity if we had had a more balanced ecosystem," Djaelanik of Indonesia's Meteorology and Geophysics Agency said.

"This is inevitably associated with the way of thinking about economic development," Manurung said, adding that people exploit natural resources to an extreme degree for commercial benefit, without being aware of the urgent need to preserve them.

Emil Salim, an environmentalist and former Indonesian environment minister, said that the only way to halt the march to disaster is "to change our vision of development accordingly".

"We are now aware that we have lost something. Only now do we see the severely damaged natural resources as a constraint. It has become an issue that is not only of concern but also threatens our lives," Salim said.

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