Indonesia: Plantations, human rights and REDD

Before the plantations came, villagers in Teluk Kabung in Riau province in Sumatra, grew coconuts. A few years ago, thousands of hectares of forest surrounding the village were clearcut and replaced by acacia monocultures to supply Asia Pulp and Paper's massive operations. “As soon as they cut down the trees in the forest, the pests swarmed in, and ate our coconut trees,” a villager told Mitra Taj, a radio journalist from Living on Earth. Dozens of dead coconut trees lie on the ground near the village. Many of those still standing are just trunks, with no palm fronds and no coconuts.

Industrial deforestation has destroyed the habitat of the Sumatran tiger to the point where there are only about 250 remaining. And these have so little forest left that they stray into plantations, villages and logging camps. Tigers that used to live in the forest now come into the village. At least ten people have been killed this year.

“It makes me want to cry,” one of the villagers told Living on Earth. “The only reason I'm not crying is because I'm holding back. We have nothing else. Sometimes I can't even look at this land, because I have no hope.”

Villagers are trying to find a solution and have sent letters to parliament, the regent and the governor, but have received no reply. First, villagers want compensation. Then they want money to buy pesticides. But there's another problem. The plantations have left the villagers with no land for the next generation.

Villagers are now considering growing oil palm, which they hope will be resistant to the pests. They asked Living on Earth's reporter to contact APP and ask them to help them. In Jakarta, Living on Earth met Aida Greenbury, APP's director of sustainability and stakeholder engagement. “Yes of course, we are always interested to help the community,” she said. Greenbury talked about the importance of leaving forest corridors, to provide habitat and to stop pest and disease outbreaks. And that, apparently, was that.

APRIL is the other pulp and paper giant operating in Riau province. Between them, APP and APRIL own about a quarter of the remaining forest in the province. APRIL's activities on the Kampar Peninsular reveal another impact of industrial tree plantations. APRIL's wood is shipped in vast barges to the company's pulp mill, PT Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (RAPP).

“Before the RAPP pulp and paper company entered our land, our group of fishermen worked peacefully, nothing disturbed us while we were fishing,” Pak Akiat a fisherman from Penyengat told film makers from LifeMosaic. “Now fishing with nets is very hard. Many of our nets are torn away by ships. Many in our group have stopped fishing, because we are afraid.”

Pak Akiat's fishing net was destroyed about one year ago. “I still want compensation from RAPP, my fishing net is broken,” he said. “I want to fish again. This is my livelihood, my only hope.”

The Kampar Peninsula is home to the Akit and Melayu indigenous peoples. They now have to rely on

government food aid. “With so many companies left, right and centre, why are 95 per cent of our people poor?” asks Anjianoro, a community leader in Penyengat, in LifeMosiac's film. “Companies like RAPP recruit thousands of workers. If we benefited from any of this there wouldn't be poverty here.”

A new solution to all these problems is being touted in international meetings such as the recent UN climate negotiations in Copenhagen: Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD). “We have been looking for an opportunity like this for decades,” Joe Leitmann at the World Bank in Jakarta told Living on Earth. “We think that with REDD it's a potential game changer.” Of course, Leitmann says nothing about the role the World Bank has played in financing forest destruction in Indonesia.

Certainly, the problems are serious. In Riau province alone, an area of 1.6 million hectares of peat and forests are likely to burn this year. But how, exactly, will REDD, this “game changer”, actually change anything? APP and APRIL hope to get REDD payments for not cutting forest in areas where they already have permission to cut. No doubt APP will want payment for its “forest corridors”. APRIL plans to plant a ring of 150,000 hectares of acacia plantations around the Kampar Peninsular and put in place a moratorium on clearing the 300,000 hectare “core” on the peninsular. APRIL anticipates large sums of carbon money. But APRIL is silent on local people's livelihoods. The company did not even bother telling local communities on the Kampar Peninsular about its plans.

The people who have lost their livelihoods to industrial tree plantations have some of the smallest carbon footprints in the world. APP and APRIL are responsible for huge greenhouse gas emissions from forest destruction and draining of peat swamps. Yet REDD would reward APP and APRIL and do nothing to stop the trampling of villagers' basic human rights.

By Chris Lang, http://chrislang.org

Living on Earth's radio programme “Where the Forest Ends”, is available here: http://bit.ly/7hLN0j
LifeMosaic's film “Eyes on the Kampar Peninsular”, is available here: http://bit.ly/5BWH01