
Indonesia: A national park, its failure and impact on livelihoods

Local conversations about the classification of the Mount Merapi forest area into a national park often end up questioning why it was established as a park at all.

Mount Merapi forest ecosystem is located at 600 to 2968 meter above sea level, in Yogyakarta Province, Republic of Indonesia. With an area of 8,655 hectares, it is mostly covered by mountain tropical forest which is the source of living of a million people in four districts.

Surface water that comes from Mount Merapi is divided into 3 directions: Progo watershed in the west part, Opak watershed in the middle and Bengawan Solo watershed in the east part. These watersheds have been supplying water for consumption, irrigation, and industry for more than 5 million people of the Jogjakarta and Central Java provinces.

Unsustainable management of Mount Merapi is threatening its very existence. Water privatization by a commercial company is preventing about one thousand farmers from planting their farms; sand mining exploitation reaches 3,5 million cubic meter/year, wellspring sources have been quickly degraded, and flora and fauna is being destroyed.

But the paradigm of the government is still the same: exploitation of resources for cash without any consideration of long term use. Economics is put beyond environment and sustainability.

Many in the area expressed their opposition to the government's plan to classify the area into Mount Merapi National Park (MMNP), when the process began in 2001. Disregarding opposition, the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry issued a decree that officially changed the forest into a protected area on May 4, 2004.

We who oppose the measure denounce that the ministerial decree violates legal principles as well as principles of transparency, democracy and human rights, and is an expression of government's arrogance.

The decree goes against an earlier decree from the same ministry that sets out due process prior to the gazetting of a national park. The decision also contravenes Law No 22/1999 on regional autonomy because it ignores the authority of regional governments and legislative councils in the area.

The concept of national park first emerged in Western countries and was strongly influenced by classical concepts of conservation --a region tightly protected with no one allowed to touch it. It later developed into an eco-fascist conservation model that placed undisturbed "nature" as a top priority even if it meant getting rid of the local inhabitants.

The world's first national park was established in the U.S. in 1872 with the gazetting of the Yellowstone National Park. The park's management did not allow anyone to make use of the natural resources in the park, disregarding the fact that it was the home of indigenous tribes. Conflicts were

unavoidable and led to the forced eviction of the indigenous communities from the region.

Unfortunately, many countries, including Indonesia, were inspired by that model. In 1980, the Indonesian government established the first five national parks.

The government applied the concept without considering its suitability to the country's social and economic conditions, apparently preferring to please Western countries rather than its own people. The fact that 42 national parks have been established across the country one after another without comprehensive studies on how the existing parks have been managed, proves so.

The conditions in many of the regions named national parks have worsened since they were gazetted as such. Instead of preserving the area and generating positive spin-offs, the establishment of national parks has often resulted in damage and disadvantage. The Mount Leuser, Mount Halimun, Kutai, Bukit Tiga Puluh, Tanjung Puting, Mount Palung, Ujung Kulon, Lore Lindu, Rawa Aopa, Komodo, Lorentz, and Wasur national parks are examples of how such conservation model leads to social and economic problems, and environmental degradation rather than preservation.

The application of the national park concept in Indonesia is not just at a theoretical level, but also at the policy and management levels. At the policy level, for example, through the National Park Management Body, the government discriminates between the rights of the management body and those of the people, who are considered subordinate to the management body. They have to obey the body without question while it applies fascist regulations that were made for the government's interests. Law No 5/1990 on the conservation of natural resources and ecosystems, which makes no mention of the people's role and rights regarding natural resources, is an example of this arrogance. The management body organization, too, is not only government-biased but, like other state organizations, suffers from corruption. As the manager of national parks, the management body holds almost complete authority. There is no room for the rights of the surrounding communities. That national park management is often corrupt is shown through its cooperation with business and the military in illegal deforestation --activities that have long been well known. The massive illegal logging that occurs in almost all national parks outside Java, including the Tanjung Puting and Mount Palung national parks, involves the management body management, businesspeople, and military personnel.

This cooperation also leads to the massive theft of biological resources, the eviction of the indigenous inhabitants and the openings of new mining sites inside supposed "national parks".

National parks in Indonesia do not mean conservation; they mean more damage to nature and the impoverishment of local communities.

One should well ask why the government established the Mount Merapi National Park without conducting comprehensive, participative studies prior to it. To my belief, the same problems in other areas will reoccur in Merapi. Why? Because the local community and the Merapi ecosystem are inseparable and interdependent.

For hundreds or maybe even thousands of years, the surrounding communities have been wisely guarding Merapi because it guarantees their livelihoods through its clean water, green trees and because it provides food, shelter and medicines.

Will the establishment of Mount Merapi National Park fix the problems caused by sand quarrying on the slope of Merapi which in turn has caused damage to its forest and dried out its springs? Will the management of the National Park care about the fate of the evicted communities after the arrival of

new "investors"? I really don't think so. The National Park system will never be able to answer these problems; it will instead create new ones that will further tarnish this beautiful area.

The problems of Merapi cannot be answered by classifying it as a national park. Only by empowering the local community and integrating the management of the Merapi area to involve all the stakeholders through the principles of cooperation, trust, participation and conservation, will we answer the area's problems.

What this area needs is a people-based conservation model, not a national park concept that has only proved to be a recurrent failure.

We won't let Merapi be another entry into the long list of national park disasters in Indonesia and also in many parts of the world, will we?

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