
Indonesia: The Nature Conservancy's plans in Komodo National Park

Komodo National Park (KNP) was established by the Government of Indonesia in 1980 to protect the habitat of the unique giant lizard *Varanus komodoensis*, called Komodo dragon. In 1995, the central government invited the US-based organisation, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to co-manage the park.

TNC is one of the largest landowners in the world. Counting on huge donations from the United States government (US\$ 147 million between 1997 and 2001, and another US\$ 142 million during the year 2000), it has been able to purchase lands and make contracts for the management of protected areas.

Along the line of the present global commercial trend in conservation followed by transnational NGOs, TNC's strategy is to generate more cash for conservation from eco-tourism and marketing. It proposes to put the management of the Komodo National Park into the hands of private company PT. Putri Naga Komodo (PNK), which is 60% owned by TNC and 40% by PT. Jaythasha Putrindo, a private tourism company of Malaysia-born hotel businessman Feisol Hashim (a relative of Malaysia's Prime Minister, Mahatir Muhammad).

The idea is supported by the World Bank and some of the communities living in the park. But there have been strong objections from other local people and local NGOs who say that neither they, nor the local government have been consulted about the plan and will not have a share in the benefits.

The other side of the coin of this strategy is to keep the area free from local people. According to TNC, the greatest immediate threat to the park comes from outside fishermen engaged in destructive fishing practices. Thus, it has helped form a team consisting of park rangers, navy, police and fishery services, which works together to carry out routine patrolling.

However, the root of the devastation should be traced back to the introduction of shrimp farming in Indonesia's mangrove coastlines.

Indonesia's aquaculture exports were valued by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) at over US\$2 billion in the year 2000 - high earnings for a debt-ridden country. But the environmental and social costs, borne by local people, are not calculated. Coastal communities are already among Indonesia's poorest - the Asian Development Bank reckons that around 80% are below the poverty line.

Mangrove coastlines cleared for shrimp farms can no longer protect coastal abrasion, provide breeding grounds for coastal fish species or provide the wood, medicinal leaves and other resources used by local communities. The intensive shrimp farms themselves are unsustainable --they need high levels of chemical inputs, pollute local coastal waters with waste and cause saltwater intrusion into rice-fields and other agricultural lands.

All this has completely distorted the life and livelihoods of coastal communities, who on the one hand

are deprived of their traditional way of living and on the other hand are blamed for the destruction.

Komodo National Park has recorded two fishermen shot dead by the KNP joint patrol team (which includes staff from The Nature Conservancy, Komodo National Park, military, and police) over the last two years. Overall, since the establishment of KNP, there have been 12 such deaths by shooting. Aside from the fatal shootings there have been more cases of violence; numerous fishermen claim to have been beaten or tortured by the KNP joint patrol team. Several fishermen and their families were exiled from the KNP zone, and no less than 40 fishermen were tortured, arrested and denied their legal rights, with each suspect being sentenced to imprisonment between one to two years by the civil court.

The implementation of the Marine Protected Area Program has impacted substantially on the livelihoods of the local fishing communities. Currently, approximately 20,000 people in KNP could lose the basis of their livelihoods. The Nature Conservancy and KNP authorities consistently report to the government and to their international donors that their community development programs have been a success. In reality most of these programs have failed.

If TNC's current plan of putting the management of the Komodo National Park into the hands of private company PT. Putri Naga Komodo goes ahead, it could set a worrying precedent: privatising national parks has serious implications for indigenous peoples whose customary-owned lands fall within the boundaries of national parks.

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