
[The Road that Threatens to Destroy the “Protected” Harapan Forest in South Sumatra, Indonesia](#)

The approval of a road construction inside the first Ecosystem Restoration Concession in Indonesia puts in evidence the inherent contradictions of such concessions. While upholding an international image of being concerned with deforestation, the government is engaged in promoting policies that lead to more deforestation.

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The Indonesian government has approved a project proposed by the mining contractor company Miner PT Marga Bara Jaya, to build a 88-kilometer road through an Ecosystem Restoration Concession (ERC) forest in South Sumatra. The approval decision came to light in June 2020 and it gives the company control of 424 hectares of the Harapan forest. The coal-hauling road is for transporting coal from the company’s mine to power plants in South Sumatra province. (1)

As explained in a [WRM Bulletin article from March 2020](#), much of Indonesia’s state-owned forests have been categorized as so-called “production forests” with Forest Concession Rights, mainly for the logging and plantation industries.

The category of Ecosystem Restoration Concessions (ERCs) was launched as a market-oriented tool, with the stated aim of reversing the increasing deforestation inside the “production forests” that are considered to have high potential for conservation. The regulation for managing ERCs establishes that the license holder should promote restoration activities to “re-establish a biological balance”. **Once that balance is reached, logging can be allowed again.**

The first company to receive an ERC was Resotrasi Ekosistem Indonesia (PT REKI) in 2007, for the Harapan Rainforest Project. That forest is also home to an indigenous, semi-nomad community, the Batin Sembilan. PT REKI is the license holder, while the British Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), BirdLife International and its Indonesian affiliate Burung Indonesia created a non-profit foundation that became the major shareholder of PT REKI.

The project covers an area of almost 80,000 hectares of lowland forest in the provinces of South Sumatra and Jambi. Previously, it was a state-run logging concession and was logged intensively in the past. Now, it is surrounded by oil palm plantations and it is filled with land conflicts, illegal logging and illegal forest clearings for oil palm plantations. (2) Yet, the road project is its single biggest and most destructive threat.

Apart from the deforestation, forest fragmentation and the overall disruption caused by the construction of the road, and subsequently by the constant passing of heavy coal trucks and workers, the road will unavoidably give access to more poachers, illegal loggers and encroachers in the area as well as an increase in human-wildlife conflict.

The approval of a road construction inside the first Ecosystem Restoration Concession in Indonesia is an emblematic example of its contradictions. While the government of Indonesia upholds an international image of being concerned with tackling deforestation, it is, at the same time, actively engaged in promoting plans and policies that lead to more deforestation. This was also a main reason why in August 2020, organisations from Indonesia and abroad sent an open letter to the Green Climate Fund, demanding it to reject Indonesian government's request for REDD+ funding for supposedly having reduced emissions from deforestation in the past. It is unacceptable that the Fund rewards governments that continue to heavily engage in and promote large-scale deforestation. (3)

WRM interviewed an activist committed to social and environmental justice in Indonesia, who has closely followed the situation in this concession area and the road project, in order to understand better the context and conflicts. His name is kept anonymous for security reasons.

WRM: Conservation NGOs claim that they are restoring the Harapan Rainforest, have you seen this happening? If not, what are the main problems?

Activist:

The condition of the Harapan Rainforest due to the ex-Forest Concession Rights, which have now transformed into the Hutan Harapan Ecosystem Restoration Concession Project, is very critical as a result of forest exploitation.

During the implementation phase of this project, not all the Batin Sembilan Indigenous Communities who reside in this area were invited to participate, one of those left out is the Pangkalan Ranjau People.

In my opinion, the restoration of what once were extractive areas through Ecosystem Restoration Concessions, like the Hutan Harapan Project, should be done by ensuring the strong involvement and guidance of Indigenous Communities at all stages: implementation, restoration, preservation, management, etc., because they are the ones who know the area best and the ones who have already been protecting the forest for generations.

WRM: Why have you been opposing the construction of the road?

Activist:

I am against all forms of exploitation of natural areas, including the exploitation generated by coal mining projects and the establishment of its supporting infrastructure.

The coal haul road is only a manifestation of a bigger problem of exploitation, namely the coal mine itself. Therefore, I firmly reject its presence.

In my opinion, the area is in a very critical condition, affected by all major logging companies due to previous extractive permits.

WRM: A road built in an area that should be restored and conserved does not make sense. Who is benefiting from and supporting such a proposal?

Activist:

The only beneficiaries of this road construction is the coal mining company itself.

WRM: How could the Harapan forest be best restored and conserved, considering the

interests of the mining, oil palm and logging industries?

Activist:

The Hutan Harapan Rainforest Restoration must ensure the involvement and guidance of Indigenous Peoples in the area in all aspects and stages. They are the ones who are able to prevent the exploitation of the rainforest and protect the environment. Thus, a collaborative work is needed.

WRM: Now that the road project is approved, what are your plans and what kind of national and international solidarity actions you think are needed?

Activist:

We support Indigenous Peoples in preserving and protecting their customary areas; we continue to object and protest this road construction to the government and related parties both, at the national and international levels; and we are making litigation and non-litigation efforts to reject coal mining expansion in the country.

International exposure of this road project and other destructive projects in Indonesia is crucial to create pressure towards the government and the companies that plan to destroy large areas of forest that forest-dependent communities depend upon.

(1) Mongabay, [Indonesia approves coal road project through forest that hosts tigers, elephants](#), July 2020

(2) REDD-Monitor, [Questions for the Harapan Rainforest Project: Land conflicts, deforestation, funding, and the proposed construction of a coal transportation road](#), 2019

(3) [The Green Climate Fund \(GCF\) must say No to more REDD+ funding requests](#), August 2020