

Saving the Heart of Borneo

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Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia have signed a pact to preserve what's left of Borneo's tropical rainforest. Do they mean it?

- *"This is an historic occasion which marks new collaboration between our three countries. This will put the Heart of Borneo on the world stage as one of the last great blocks of forest in the world" ? MS Kaban, Indonesian Minister of Forestry*

On Feb. 12, in an elaborate ceremony in Bali, representatives of the three governments with jurisdiction over the ecological jewel that is the island of Borneo signed the "Heart of Borneo" Declaration, promising to conserve one of the most important centers of biological diversity in the world.

Designed to conserve and provide sustainable management for almost a third of the island ? approximately 220,000 square kilometers of equatorial rainforest – the historic pact represents an unusual although not unprecedented approach. The central African states of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and Gabon in 1999 committed themselves to international administration of the Congo Basin forests in Africa and there are signs that a joint policy can work.

"The goal is to keep the Borneo natural heritage for the benefit of present and future generations and to fully respect sovereignty over each other's territorial borders without prejudice," Indonesian Forestry Minister MS Kaban said at the ceremony.

But there are questions whether the governments involved really are committed to saving the rainforest. The officials who signed the pact ? Natural Resources and Environment Minister Azmi Khalid of Malaysia, Indonesia's Kaban, and Brunei's Industry and Primary Resources Minister Awang Ahmad Jumat – represent countries with vastly different needs and agendas despite their common geography.

Only the Sultanate of Brunei, which covers just 7.3 percent of the island's 743,107 sq km, has shown a full commitment to the preservation of its rainforest. Some 75 percent of Brunei is covered by primary rainforest, a pristine environment of whitewater rivers, waterfalls, deep jungle, longhouses and uncounted species of flora and fauna. Of course, It has the luxury to remain that way because the sultanate is almost exclusively dependent on the sale of 200,000 barrels of crude oil per day.

By contrast in Malaysia's part of Borneo, just five days before the signing of the agreement, police assisted the Malaysian logging giant Samling Group to remove a three-year blockade set up by local indigenous Penan tribes in Upper Baram in the state of Sarawak in an attempt to halt logging in one of the country's last primary forests.

Samling has received certification and logging licenses from the Sarawak State Authorities as well as from the Malaysian Timber Council (MTCC). Although the Penan have strongly contested the certification and licenses at the High Court in Sarawak since 1998, they are no match for the corporate giants.

Across Malaysia and Indonesia, it is a cruel fact that the lure of profit from a burgeoning bio-diesel industry in the United States and Europe is also driving the leveling of increasing amounts of Borneo's rainforest. In other words, the drive to ease dependence on fossil fuels in one region is helping to destroy vital forest cover in another region.

Palm oil-related products are driving the creation of massive palm oil plantations acquired through large-scale slash and burn practices. The result is a deep annual haze that blankets parts of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The open burning of huge swaths of forest is a cheap means of clearing land and has been going on for years with especially adverse effects in the last 10 years.

Since 1996, deforestation across Indonesia alone has increased to an average of 2 million hectares per year, devastating an area about half the size of the Netherlands. Today only half of Borneo's storied original forest cover remains.

The island is home to 13 species of primates, 150 species of reptiles and amphibians, over 350 species of birds. Borneo also has a cat species unique to the island, the bay cat, which is considered one of the rarest cats in the world as well as 15,000 species of plants with 6,000 found nowhere else in the world. It continues to be the source of many new discoveries, with more than 50 new species were discovered last year alone.

Dionysius Sharma, the World Wildlife Fund-Malaysia's chief executive officer, is hopeful that the new agreement can help. The three countries "have come together with a shared vision that will promote sustainable development, protect vital natural resources and reduce poverty and should be an inspiration to everyone," he said.

Can the three governments maintain an effective commitment to the enforcement of security of the Heart of Borneo declaration? According to a United Nations Environment Program report released on Feb. 6 ? the day before the Penan were ousted from their barricades ? the natural rainforests in Sumatra and Borneo are being cleared so rapidly that up to 98 percent may be gone by 2022 unless urgent action begins immediately. Illegal logging driven by global demand accounts for an estimated 73 percent-plus of all logging in Indonesia.

Another report, by the environmental group Mongabay, based in the United States, points out that consumption of tropical timber by the US and other industrial countries plays a significant role in deforestation. The US, according to Mongabay's report, consumes 17 percent of the world's timber output and is the third largest importer of tropical timber although it has less than five percent of the world's population.

The UNEP's report concludes that loss of orangutan habitat is happening at a rate of up to 30 percent higher than previously thought. Indonesia, the report says, is active in fighting illegal logging and is working with a number of international programs but the assistance of the international community is crucial.

H. E. Rachmat Witoelar, Indonesia's environment minister and the outgoing president of UNEP's Governing Council, said; "We are currently in an unequal struggle over illegal logging, which in the medium to long-term could be won through certification processes. Such processes can help global consumers choose between sustainably produced wood and palm-oil products and those produced illegally and unsustainably".

In 2006 smoke from forest fires in Malaysia and Indonesia clouded the region during the usual dry season during the month of July to October. It was however milder in comparison to the haze that engulfed the region in 1997 and 1998 when approximately six and a half million hectares of land

were burned in Kalimantan alone, nearly half of which was forest covered.

If the Heart of Borneo agreement works, it may be a relief to the local population as it seeks to end plans to create the world's largest palm oil plantation in Kalimantan, along the border with Malaysia. This plan, which was to be funded and supported by Chinese investment, would have included approximately 1.8 million hectares. The environmental degradation from this plan had it come to fruition would have been disastrous for the Heart of Borneo. The plan was widely regarded by environmentalists as a ploy to cut millions of cubic metres of tropical hardwood.

The Malaysian state of Sabah and the forests of Borneo still hold huge tracts of natural forests. This is one of only two places – the other being Indonesia's Sumatra island – where orangutan, elephants and rhinos still co-exist and where forests are large enough to maintain viable populations. Yet in 2001 a World Bank report predicted that all of Sumatra's forest would soon be destroyed outside protected areas.

Borneo could lose most of its lowlands by 2010. Among the first casualties of this predicament are the Orangutans who once lived all the way from southern China to the foothills of the Himalayas and south to the island of Java. Today, they are confined to the rapidly dwindling forests of Sumatra and Borneo.

Just 100 years ago there were probably more than 230,000 orangutans in Borneo and Sumatra. In the last 10 years alone their numbers have declined by 30-50 percent, and now just over 60,000 survive.

In Indonesia's Kalimantan province, 10,000 square kilometers of lowland peat swamp forest were partially cleared in the 1990s for conversion to rice fields. In Sumatra, illegal logging is still rampant. Satellite studies show that some 56 percent (more than 29,000 square kilometers) of protected lowland forests in Kalimantan were cut down between 1985 and 2001. Another species moving perilously close to extinction is the rhino of Borneo. There are fewer than 13 left in the interior forests of Sabah, where the main threats are poaching – its horn and virtually all of its body parts are valuable on the black market for Chinese medicine – and loss of its forested habitat.

Without the maintenance of very large blocks of interconnected forest, there is a clear risk that hundreds of species could become extinct. Large mammals such as orangutans, elephants, Borneo rhinos and others are particularly at risk because of the vast areas they require to survive. Other smaller species, especially small mammals may not be able to re-colonize isolated patches of suitable habitat and thus will become locally extinct. Road construction through Protected Areas leads to further separation of habitat ranges and provides easy access for poachers to some of the more remote and diverse tracts of remaining virgin forest.

The problem is further exacerbated because the majority of Borneo's rivers are also threatened by deforestation and destruction of the environment. The rivers originate in the island's uplands and are crucial to maintaining water supply and mitigating the effect of fires and droughts. They function as an ecological support system for the lowlands. These watersheds face being lost forever to the world.

Can we trust Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei to preserve what's left of Borneo's beauty and its ecological importance to our very own survival? That remains to be seen.