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FOREST DEFENDERS CAMP - saving our forests, saving our climate

In December 2007, Indonesia will host the next round of international negotiations on tackling global climate change. Meanwhile, the forests of Indonesia are being destroyed for oil palm plantations and the greenhouse gases released by deforestation make Indonesia the world's third largest greenhouse gas emitting country. (1)

Greenpeace is working with local communities to bring global attention to the huge extent of forest destruction in Indonesia. The loss of forests is rendering species extinct and depriving local communities of their homes. This is also a crucial international issue as forest destruction and forest fires are having a massive impact on global climate.

To help raise awareness of both the destruction of Indonesia's forests and climate change impacts, Greenpeace opened a Forest Defenders Camp (FDC) in Riau Province, Sumatra on 9 October.

In collaboration with local communities in Riau, Greenpeace will bear witness and document the rampant destruction of the region's peatland forests which are cleared to be replaced by oil palm plantations, with some of the timber being used by the numerous pulp mills in this region.

There is a strong sense that governments and the international community are still turning a blind eye to the destruction of the forests. Forests help regulate the world's climate and global weather patterns. They are critical environmental systems that support life on earth.

The setting up of the FDC is specifically timed to draw attention to the interrelated problems of forest destruction, oil palm plantations and climate change in advance of December's meeting of the Kyoto Protocol, to be held in Bali, Indonesia.

Conversion and drainage and/or burning of forests for oil palm expansion is why recent estimates rank Indonesia as the country with the third largest greenhouse gas emissions after China and the United States.

Greenpeace is calling for action to reduce deforestation to be included in the next phase of the Kyoto Protocol covering the period after 2012. This is a critical step in securing the financing and capacity needed by the governments of tropical forest countries to tackle forest destruction, allowing them to make a serious contribution to global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Forest Defenders Camp location

The FDC is located in Riau Province, 150 km to the south and east of Pekanbaru, at the border of the plantations held by various subsidiaries of the company PT Duta Palma Nusantara, near Kuala Cenaku village, Indragiri Hulu Regency. The camp will

be based close to the forest wall, where an active palm oil concession is clearing peatland forest. The nearest town is Rengat, about 20 km from the camp.

Volunteers at the FDC will participate in a variety of activities including forest fire spotting, fighting forest fires, conducting peatland depth surveys and undertaking a comprehensive biodiversity assessment.

The main camp structure, the Balai Adat, is a traditional Sumatran community meeting house located on community land. The area surrounding the camp has recently been cleared of forest and peatlands have been destroyed to make way for oil palm plantations.

The activities and documentation work conducted over the coming months will be used in drawing attention to the urgency of ending deforestation, the loss of biodiversity and the problem of climate change in the run up to Indonesia's hosting of December's international climate change negotiations.



Deforestation

Around the world, an area of forest the size of one football pitch is destroyed on average every two seconds. This is driving a major loss of biodiversity and destroying the livelihoods of many millions of people who depend upon forests. Deforestation is also a major driver of climate change, accounting for one-fifth of global greenhouse gas emissions (2). This figure excludes emissions arising from forest degradation, resulting from activities such as industrial selective logging (both legal and illegal), road building and other infrastructure development.

Tropical rainforests around the world are under threat and The Paradise Forests of the Asia-Pacific region are no exception.

The Paradise Forests of the Asia-Pacific (which stretch from peninsular Southeast Asia, through Indonesia, to New Guinea and the Solomon Islands) are being destroyed at an alarming rate and Indonesia's forests are falling at a faster rate than any other major forested country.

Indonesia is home to between 10 and 15 per cent of all known species of plants, mammals and birds which make up the world's biodiversity (3). Orangutans, elephants, tigers, rhinoceros, more than 1,500 species of birds and thousands of plant species are all part of the natural legacy of the country but many of these unique forest-dwelling animals are on the brink of extinction. These include the orangutan and the Sumatran tiger.

Most of Indonesia's pristine intact forest landscapes have already been degraded. Seventy two per cent of Indonesia's large intact ancient forest areas (4) and 40 per cent of its forest have been completely lost.

Forest destruction in Indonesia is being driven today by oil palm plantations, pulp wood plantations and timber industries. Logging for tropical timber and pulpwood is a major cause of forest loss and oil palm plantations are a growing threat, with a new 'gold rush' mentality driving massive expansion plans. Palm oil is one of the world's leading vegetable oil commodities and is used in a myriad of products including food and cosmetics. Expansion plans are also being fuelled by the expected rapid growth in demand for bio-diesel made from palm oil.

Despite years of study and media attention to deforestation, the incidence and effects of accidental fire in Indonesian forests have been ignored.

Peatland destruction

Although most often associated with temperate or boreal regions, large amounts of peat also occur in the tropics as peat swamp forests, notably in Indonesia. Although smaller in area than temperate or boreal peatlands, tropical peat swamp forests are a globally important store of terrestrial carbon because of their depth - often several meters thick.

Peatlands in Indonesia are being logged, drained and burned at alarming rates. (5) Over 90 per cent of Indonesia's greenhouse gas emissions are caused by deforestation, the largest proportion being emitted is currently from the peatland forests of Kalimantan and Sumatra.

Oil palm plantations are a major driver of peatland destruction. Prior to planting palm oil plants, trees which are of value to the timber market are logged then diggers move through the forest making canals in the peat land. These quickly fill with water and are used to transport the logs out of the forest. The last step is to drain the canals,

According to a report by the Indonesian Forest Ministry and the European Union:

“The world demand for palm oil is forecast to increase from its present 20.2 million tonnes a year to 40 million tonnes in 2020. If this demand is to be met, 300.000 ha of new estates will need to be planted in each of the next 20 years. We predict that by far the largest slice of this new land will come from within Indonesia where labour and land remain plentiful. And we expect that Sumatra, with its relatively well-developed infrastructure and nucleus of skilled labour, will absorb 1.6 million hectares of this expansion. It is inevitable that most new oil palm will be in the wetlands, as the more 'desirable' dry lands of the island are now occupied.”

which dries out the peatlands sufficiently to allow forest and peat fires to be set. Finally, the degraded area is planted with oil palm.

Unfortunately, the law against using fire is not well enforced and not easy to enforce - but on the other hand the Indonesian government is still releasing new permits to clear cut natural forest area for pulpwood and oil-palm plantations.

Protecting south-east Asia's remaining peat forests from drainage, land conversion, logging and fires is essential. By exposing peatland forest clearance and the drawing the links between oil palm expansion, forest destruction and climate change, we will show how crucial it is for deforestation to be part of the post-2012 phase of the Kyoto Protocol.

What is Greenpeace asking for?

Greenpeace is calling on the Indonesian government to commit to a moratorium on deforestation and industrial logging; a review of laws, governance and law enforcement; and the implementation of a responsible and just land-use planning system.

In the short-term, prior to December's Kyoto protocol meeting in Bali, Greenpeace demands that the Indonesian government commit to a moratorium on conversion and destruction of Indonesian peatland forests and ensure the implementation of an effective action plan against forest fires.

Ending deforestation also requires international action. Deforestation must therefore be included in the second phase of the Kyoto Protocol. Stabilising the world's climate depends on countries making deep cuts in their energy-related emissions and completely halting deforestation.

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Footnotes

(1) Climate Analysis Indicators Tool (CAIT) Version 4.0. (Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 2007).

(2) IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), 2007. Climate Change 2007: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA.

(3) WRI (World Resources Institute) in collaboration with UNDP, UNEP and World Bank 2005. The wealth of the poor – managing ecosystems to fight poverty. Washington DC: WRI.

(4) World Resources Institute, The Last Frontier Forests, 1997

(5) Wetlands International estimates that two billion tonnes of carbon dioxide is released each year from drainage and burning of peatland forests in South East Asia (8 per cent of total global greenhouse gas emissions), 90 per cent of which comes from Indonesia.